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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

CONTROL™

Bend the supernatural to your will in Remedy's next thriller

NAME
Judge Martha A.

OCCUPATION
Municipal Court Judge

GENRE
Racing Games

HANDLE
SwiftJustice00035

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*Excludes purchases of GameStop gift cards.

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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

And Just Like That

Just when you think you know what consumers want, someone comes along and changes everything. In the talk I heard before its launch, Apex Legends didn't sound like a game changer. I knew the Respawn team would make a tight experience. But given how much the market was dominated by Fortnite, it was hard to imagine a game based in the Titanfall universe – a series of great games that never quite found the commensurate level of success – would be the one to challenge for the battle-royale throne.

The success of Apex Legends shows that battle royale is more than a blip. People are looking for more (and different) experiences that challenge and sometimes reward with that hard-fought taste of victory. It's good to see that well-made experiences have a shot, even in a market as crowded as the battle-royale genre. It just takes perfect timing – the right title at the right time. As it turns out, Apex Legends was that game. It has basically rewritten the script for 2019, and we aren't even at the halfway point.

Like any success, time will tell if it can keep the masses engaged, but one thing is for sure: It challenges Fortnite, Call of Duty's Blackout mode, and PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds to push the formula forward or be left in the dust. Competition, as they say, is a good thing.

I love that people call Apex Legends the Beyoncé of video games. It takes someone with a long history of success to drop a game no one has ever heard of out of the blue and become an overnight sensation. I suspect many other publishers will try this formula, but it's the pedigree and the perfect timing that led to Apex Legends' success.

I can't wait to see what it does to all the shooters out there, as I think titles like Destiny and Overwatch (just to name a few) have to find ways to be more than what they were. There is always a next game coming to take your spot at the top. We are in a time where you must innovate or die, even though much of the innovation is just emulating something someone did before, but doing it better.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

40 **Control**
The creators of Max Payne, Alan Wake, and Quantum Break are back with a supernatural action game set in an ever-evolving environment. We visited the studio in Finland to find out what we should expect from its mysterious new project. ***by Elise Favis***

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We talked to Sony and Nike about how their collaboration came together.

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The prolific developer surprised everyone with its sudden closure last year. We examine the studio's legacy and talk to key figures to find out what happened.

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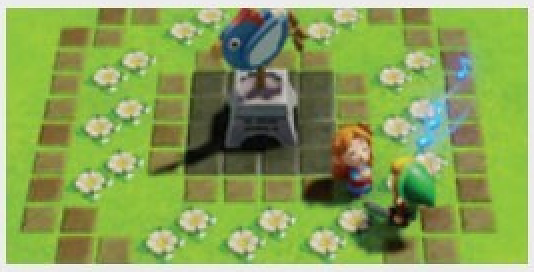

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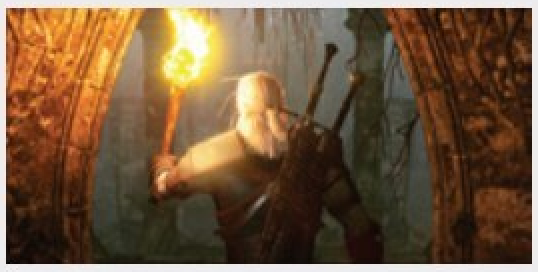

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How does choice work in video games? We spoke with the developers who do it best to learn more.

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Darksiders' Haydn Dalton has a new studio working on a class-based shooter. We played a bunch of it.

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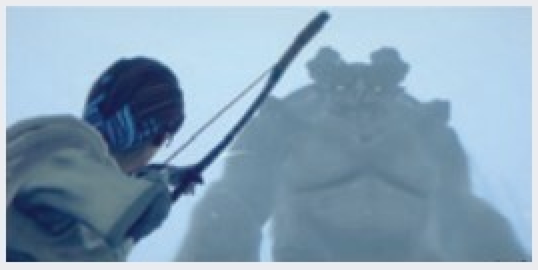
Darth Clark is back for another year of Infarcer. Learn about a Star Wars game you'll never play, a Mortal Kombat game you don't want, and a solution for all your Fallout 76 woes.



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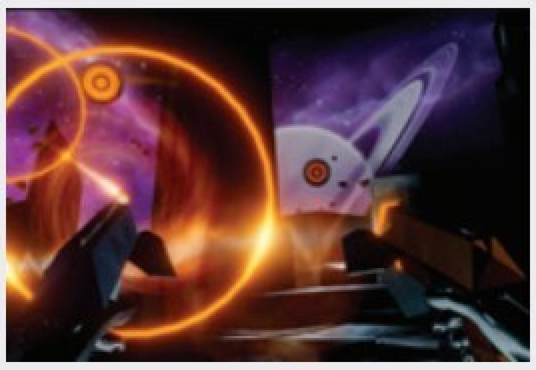
Games like Breath of the Wild and Shadow of the Colossus serve as the major inspirations for this moody action game.



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Harmonix explores the world of rhythm VR with its latest music game.

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The creators of Titanfall delivered a battle royale out of nowhere… and it's good!

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The dark Russian tale about nuclear fallout continues to deliver engaging and scary experiences.

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What fun is a Top 50 list without a subsequent month of complaints about our opinions? That's not a hypothetical question we have to worry about answering this year. Not even close.

Complain By Numbers

In your Top 50 feature (issue 310), you listed God of War as your Game of the Year for 2018. But in your Editor Top 10 lists, Red Dead Redemption II is the top pick for nine editors, while God of War is the top pick for only six editors. How does it work out that God of War wins GotY then?

Daniel Hensel
via email

I noticed a disturbing flaw with your Top 50 awards. You guys named God of War as your GotY. This seemed obviously wrong, so I performed a weighted ranking of the Editor Top 10 lists (where a first place choice gets 10 points, second place gets 9 points, etc.). God of War ended up with 150 points, and Red Dead Redemption II got 143 points, proving by a 7-point margin that you idiots really did pick the wrong game! At least nine of your editors got it right…

Gavin Jones
via email

We were ready to copy and paste our regular "the GotY isn't decided by mathematical formula" response, but we can't stop laughing at Gavin's response. Well, nine of us can't stop laughing. The others not so much.

A Glaring Omission

I just read your Top 50 list and I was quite surprised that Nier Automata was nowhere to be found. I mean, that game has depth, replay value, and asks intriguing philosophical questions about life. Sure, other games like God of War, Red Dead Redemption II, etc. need attention for what they brought to the table, but not one mention of Nier Automata? Heck, not even one editor put it on their Top 10 list either! Where's the love? It may seem like I'm complaining, but I can't help but defend a game that deserves recognition too!

Frank Marte Jr.
via email

The points you make about Nier Automata certainly aren't wrong, Frank. However, the game does suffer from one major flaw that ultimately kept it off the list: It was released in 2017. As such, it was ineligible for 2018's list. On the bright side, it did make 2017's Top 50, and was highlighted by half a dozen editors on their Top 10 lists that year.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Down On Downloads

As a fan of the original Spyro games, I was super excited for the Spyro Reignited Trilogy. Then I learned that despite being a physical release, the second and third games are only included as downloads. This is completely unfair for people like me who don't have internet or who have data caps. The only options are to ask a friend with wi-fi if you can haul your PS4 to his/her house just to get the other two-thirds of your game, or worse yet, take the console and TV to a Taco Bell, creating a huge scene in the process. I think this was a much bigger disappointment than the entries on your Top 10 Disappointments list, and I had to cancel my preorder with a heavy heart. I just hope you guys understand my concern, and that Activision will have a change of heart and give the game a proper physical release.

Anonymous
via email

We're not sure if that Taco Bell scenario was hypothetical or not, but either way, we certainly do understand your frustration; many of us take 24/7 internet access for granted nowadays, including publishers. However, the massive game downloads, content updates, and game-salvaging patches add up fast – and that's if you have internet in the first place. Our online dependency won't be changing anytime soon, but given their audience, publishers will hopefully be a little more conscientious with remasters of the classics.

Who Reviews The Reviewers?

When it comes to deciding who reviews a game, how much does a writer's anticipation, nostalgia, or love/hate of the series come into play? Obviously, if I hate Resident Evil games, it probably wouldn't make much sense for me to review them. But is the other side of the spectrum true as well? This came to mind when I read Kimberley Wallace's glowing Kingdom Hearts 3 review. I'm not saying she's wrong or that the praise is undeserved, but it got me wondering if huge fans of a series are susceptible to looking past the faults of a game?

Travis Manick
via email

As you may have guessed from the name of the magazine, we want our reviews to be as informative as possible. As such, experience is the driving factor when picking a reviewer – someone who is proficient both in the specific series and overall genre, and can tell what makes an entry different or special from its predecessors. Being a diehard fan of a series isn't a necessity, but it's also not a deterrent; fans are often the harshest critics when a series runs afoul, and all of our editors are committed to identifying and articulating the good and bad aspects of a game as truthfully as possible.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why didn't you publish your Smash Bros. Ultimate review in the December issue instead of the January issue?"

Actually, it was our February issue, but basically it all comes down to print deadlines and time travel.

"I make 17 in a week, so I can finally play Mature-rated games. So, which M-rated game is best for me?"

Sorry, but as an adult you are now officially required to make those decisions for yourself.

"Will the next Mega Man game come out really soon, or I will have to wait another 10 years?"

It will definitely be one of those. Or somewhere in between.

Question Of The Month:

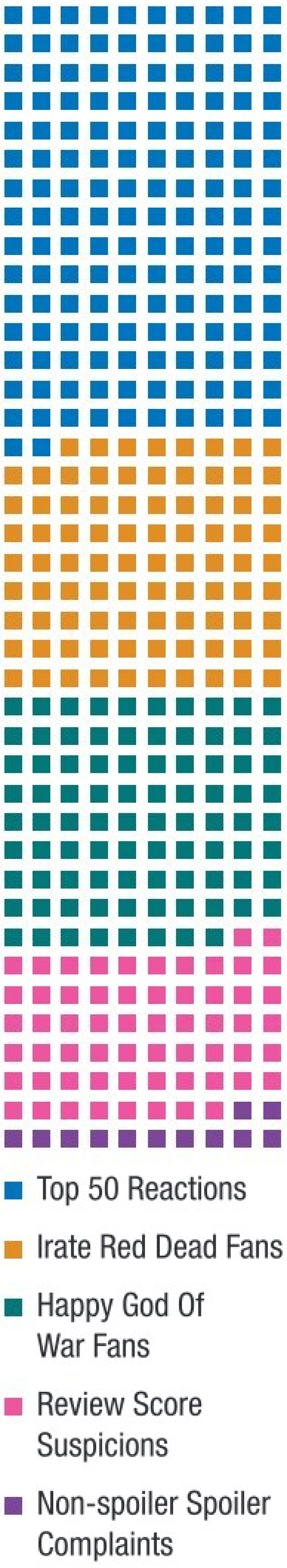
If you could have the ability/super power of a video game character, whose would it be and why?

gi spy

(Left) This month Shea and Elise visited Remedy Entertainment to learn all about Control from game director Mikael Kasurinen and creative director Sam Lake **(Right)** They even did their own motion-capture session, which you can check out at gameinformer.com/control

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Fight For The Future

Okay, so I noticed Jeff Cork, who gave Super Smash Bros. Ultimate a 9.5, criticizes problems I don't have. For example, he said the framerate during online multiplayer is inconsistent, but when I play with my friends there is no network lag whatsoever. I think Super Smash Bros. Ultimate deserves at least a 10, because Jeff also failed to account for the fact that Joker from Persona 5 is coming to Smash (I'm excited!) along with other possible DLC. Masahiro Sakurai had to pull a lot of strings to get him, and he's not even in the game yet but we are all happy. So if you please, review Super Smash Bros. Ultimate again while considering the future and such.

Nathan Chase
via email

While we admire your passion for SSBU deserving "at least" a 10, Nathan, we don't score titles based on the potential of content that isn't in the game yet. We can only go by the personal experience we had playing the actual game. In Jeff Cork's case, that experience was one of the very best – so don't sweat the half-point difference!

Everyone's A Critic

In issue 310, we gave readers an open invitation to complain about our Top 50. However, it turns out we were absolutely right about everything! Oh, who are we kidding – here are your complaints.

I agreed with most of your Top 50 and even loved God of War, but I went on a Yosemite Sam-style swearing spree when I saw that Red Dead Redemption II didn't win GotY from y'all.

Ben Levine

I would say you guys messed up on the Best Fighting Game award. I feel like Super Smash Bros. Ultimate deserves the reward. Dragon Ball FighterZ is a great fighting game, but Smash Ultimate gave fans what they wanted – every character who has ever been in the series, plus more! You guys also gave Smash Ultimate at 9.5 compared to a 9.25 for FighterZ. I just feel Ultimate is the better game.

Reece Clark

You guys omitted Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon from your Top 50. At least one-fourth of the spots on that list should've gone to Bloodstained. Just saying.

Noah Mamet

This isn't one you messed up on, but rather it was a great surprise: I was so excited to see Darksiders 3 in the Top 50! The game has been an unexpected hit for me! Good call adding it to the list.

Mike Smits

(Left) Matt Bertz ran into some old friends at this year's D.I.C.E.: former Rockstar legend Jeronimo Barrera, who is starting up a new company called Compound Development, and Other Oceans' Tom Russo **(Right)** Bertz also caught up with Gnet's Shelby Hill, Hellbent Games' Zoe Flower, and 47 Communications' Sibel Sunar

WINNER

1 August Kimbrell

Gritty Jak and Daxter reboot, anyone?

2 Paul Nave

Bob Ross would definitely approve of those trees.

3 Aaliyah Pemberton

Gown fashion has really changed over the years.

4 Lily Scrivner, Age 9

Somehow the classic mascots are even more endearing when drawn by a nine year old.

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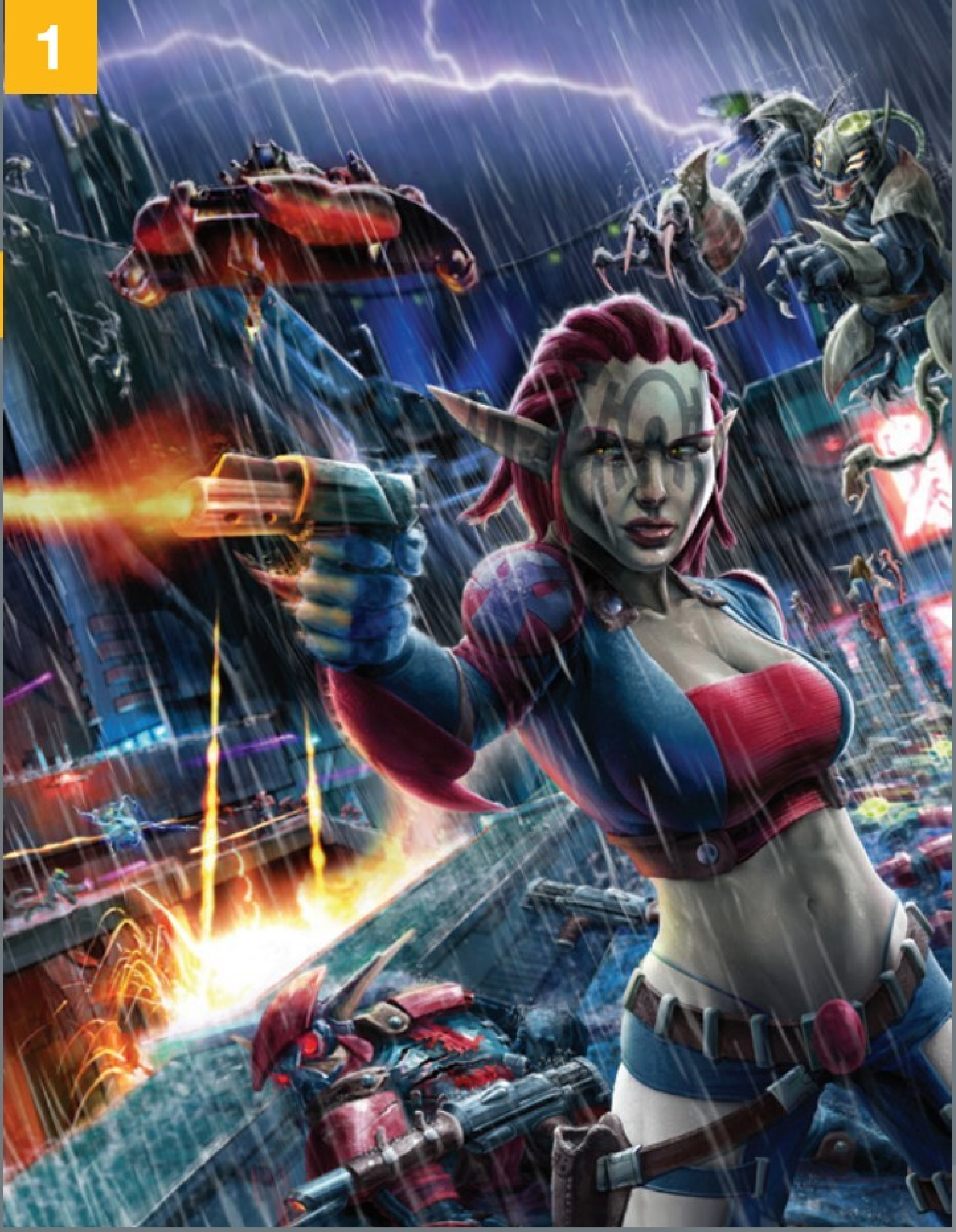

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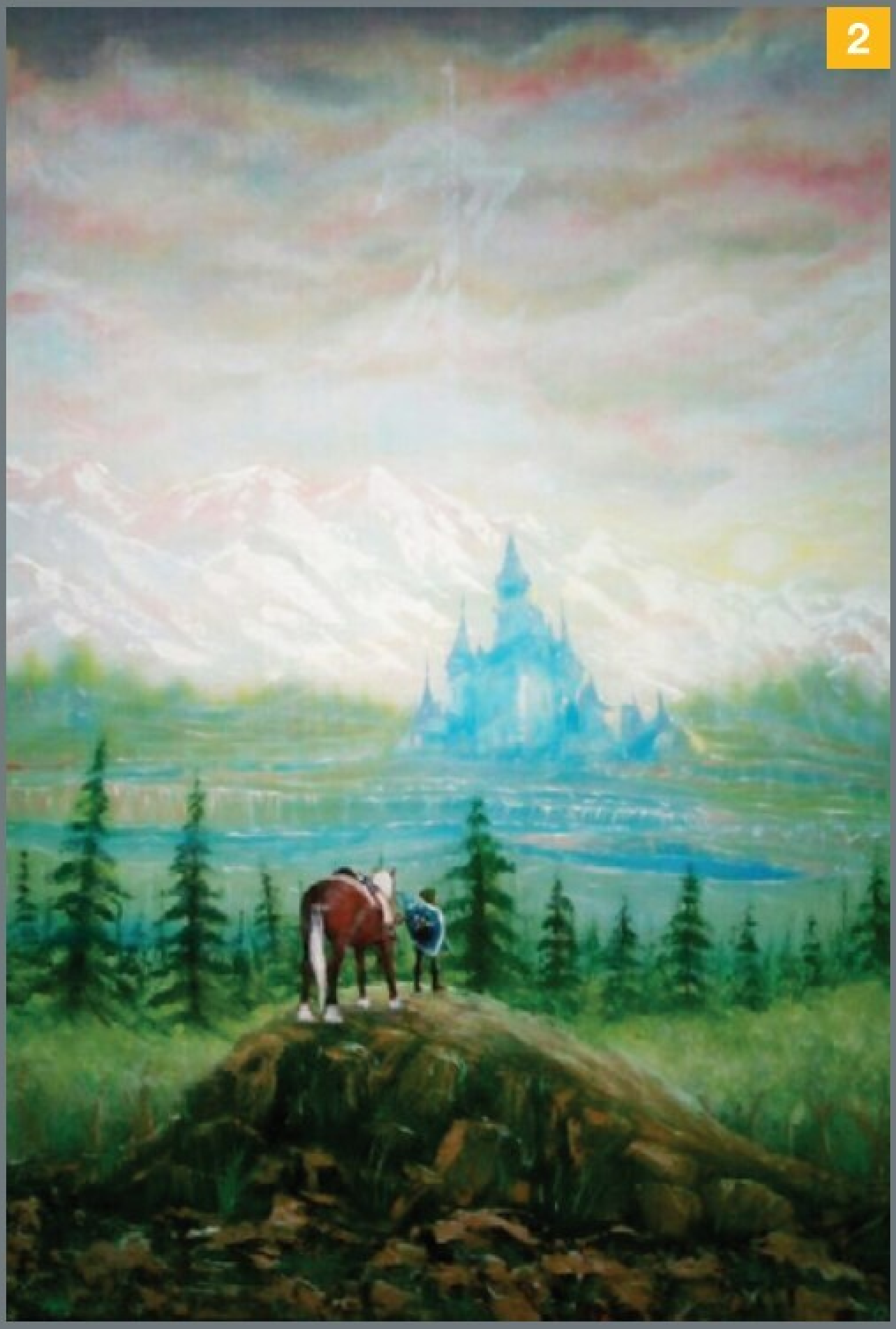

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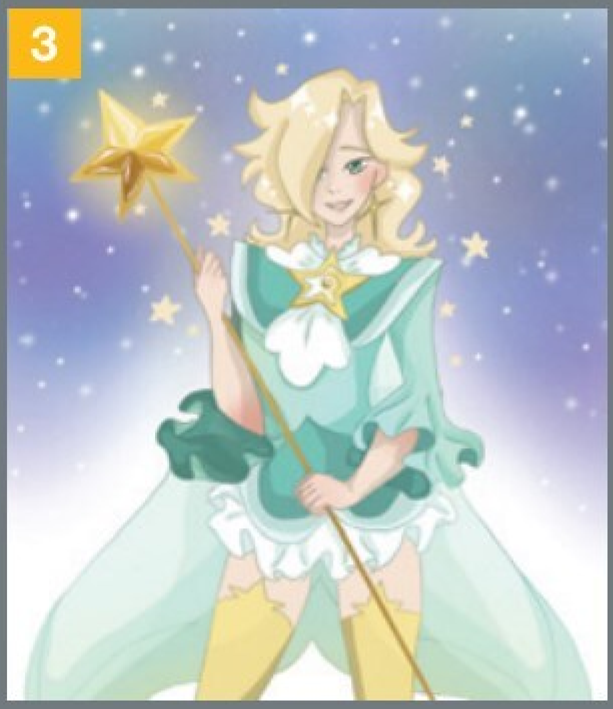

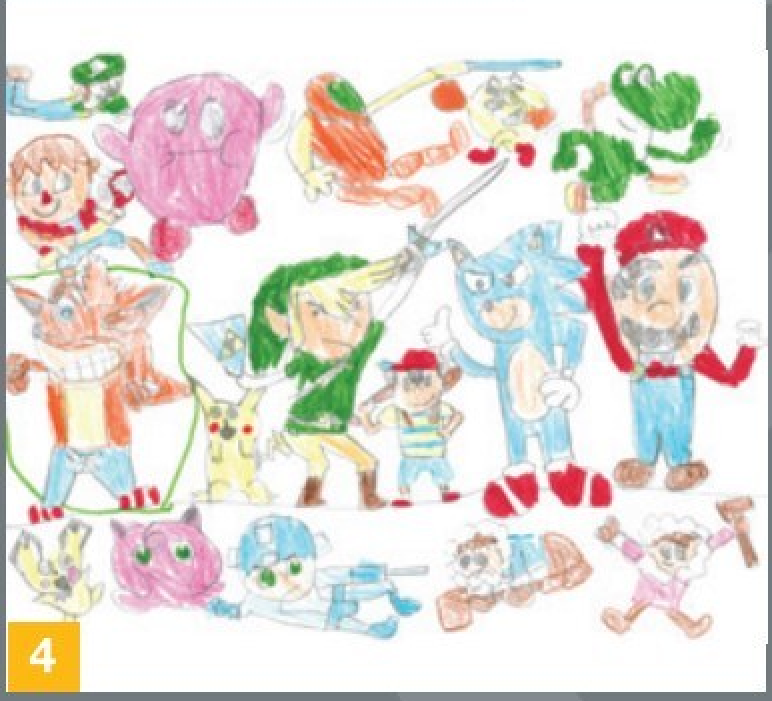

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(Left) This month Suriel learned all about Mortal Kombat 11 from series creator Ed Boon. He's the one Suriel is pointing to, if that wasn't clear **(Right)** Hanson, Reeves, and Leo congratulated former G.I. video editor Wade Wojcik (second to left) and Lee Anderson (second to right) after they premiered their Halo fan film, Dawn Under Heaven. Go watch it now on YouTube!

connect

The recent Nike/PlayStation collaboration has yielded several highly sought after collector's shoes. Here's how the relationship between these two giants came to be

by Matt Bertz

JUST FOR KICKS

Gamers don't just play what they love anymore, they wear it. Fans display allegiance to beloved gaming franchises just like we do with our favorite musicians and sports teams. You can hardly walk down the street anymore without seeing someone rocking Nintendo, Overwatch, or N7 gear.

The proliferation of gaming fashion was largely driven by the explosion of availability in online geek shops, but in the past few years it's started penetrating bigger fashion brands. Vans' line of Nintendo-themed shoes starring Mario, Donkey Kong, and Zelda proved immensely popular when it launched in 2016. Late last year, longtime music merch collaborator Barking Irons launched an entire line of Red Dead Redemption II apparel.

The biggest gaming fashion moment in recent years unsurprisingly came via a partnership between two global brands on the forefront of their respective industries. Sony is riding high on the coattails of the PlayStation 4, the dominant console of this generation. Nike has been on the bleeding edge of shoe innovation and marketing for decades. The two joined powers in 2018 to create five limited-edition shoes that sold out immediately, and to this day generate high price tags in resale markets. We spoke to the companies about how this collaboration came to be and what the massive success of the partnership means moving into the future.

A SUPERSTAR SUGGESTION

Oklahoma Thunder small forward Paul George is widely considered one of the world's best basketball players. The six-time NBA all-star is one of the hardest defenders to score against, and on the other end of the floor, he's equally tough to shut down. His proficiency on the court earned him a spot alongside NBA legends like Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant as a Nike signature athlete. That rarified status gives George the ability to help design and create his own shoe line. Nike designers work alongside the athlete to make sure the shoes reflect their court prowess and personality.

When it came time to dream up colorway variants to George's popular PG shoe line, Nike designer Tony Hardman knew video games would likely play a role given the player's passion for them. "We just wanted to think a little bigger about it, knowing how important gaming is to Paul and his life," Hardman says. "He's always playing, he's always on the road competing, and he loves it. We just knew that was the right connection, it was really natural."

George expressed interest in creating a PlayStation-themed shoe, which helped rekindle a relationship between Nike and Sony. The companies worked together on a rare, PlayStation-themed Air Force 1 shoe back in 2006 and were already in preliminary discussions about doing a follow-up. Sony loved the idea of working alongside an athlete as passionate about games as George.

"We thought, 'Wow, what could be better than this?'" says Eric Lempel, PlayStation's senior vice president of marketing. "You've got a guy who's a legitimate fan from the PlayStation One, you've got Nike, and you've got PlayStation. If we could all get together and do something interesting it would be great."

Hardman and some other Nike designers flew down to meet with the PlayStation team, then drew up some preliminary sketches of the shoe. Using the PlayStation controller and color scheme as inspiration, they presented the mock to George, who made a few suggestions of his own. Hardman thought this collaboration would be the perfect time to integrate an LED technology he had been kicking around for a while.

"I had a history of doing lights and things like that at Sketchers, but we hadn't done any of it at Nike Basketball," he says. "It's not really a performance thing, so it's not something we usually tinker around with. But at one of our meetings we had with Paul, we asked him what he would want to be if he wasn't a basketball player, and he said something in electronics. That sparked the initial idea that we should do something with some kind of light in his shoe and tell that story."

The LEDs became the standout feature on the shoe, pulsing with the classic PlayStation blue hue to illuminate the Paul George and PlayStation logos on each shoe tongue. The design also featured a unique voucher code

The PG2 PlayStation model was the result of a collaboration between Nike, NBA all-star Paul George, and Sony

on the back of the shoe that allowed the purchaser to redeem a Paul George theme for their PS4.

Released in February 2018, the sneakers captured the imagination of shoe and gaming fans alike, selling quickly on the Nike SNKRS app. “The response to that was incredible, it was overwhelming,” Lempel says. “We couldn’t believe the traffic. We couldn’t believe how it was trending. It was just massive.”

Nike typically makes only a limited number of its themed shoes, so supply almost never overshoots demand. This has led to a lucrative resale market on sites like StockX and GOAT, where users spend sometimes exorbitant amounts of money for highly-sought after sneakers. Interest proved high for the PG2 PlayStation model on these aftermarket sites, selling for as much as $1,000. The success led to three other PlayStation-themed PG2.5 colorways, one of which tapped into nostalgia by using the original PlayStation wolf grey color palette.

THE LONG-SOUGHT SEQUEL

While the PlayStation PG2s generated tons of interest, Nike and Sony had another move up their sleeves: the sequel to their original Air Force 1 collaboration. This time, Sony didn’t want the shoes to be ridiculously scarce; their creation was intended for fans from the beginning.

“The goal was to do it around E3 all along because E3 plays a big part in our industry,” Lempel says. “We thought now that E3 has a consumer component to it there will be a lot of people around and we’ll launch this thing and do something special.”

After Nike posted an “Inside the Vault” retrospective chronicling the creation of the original PlayStation Air Force 1 on its site, sneakerheads started speculating whether this could lead to another edition of the shoes. When E3 attendees were greeted by a giant billboard across the street from the L.A. Convention Center promoting a Nike swoosh alongside the PlayStation logo, excitement grew.

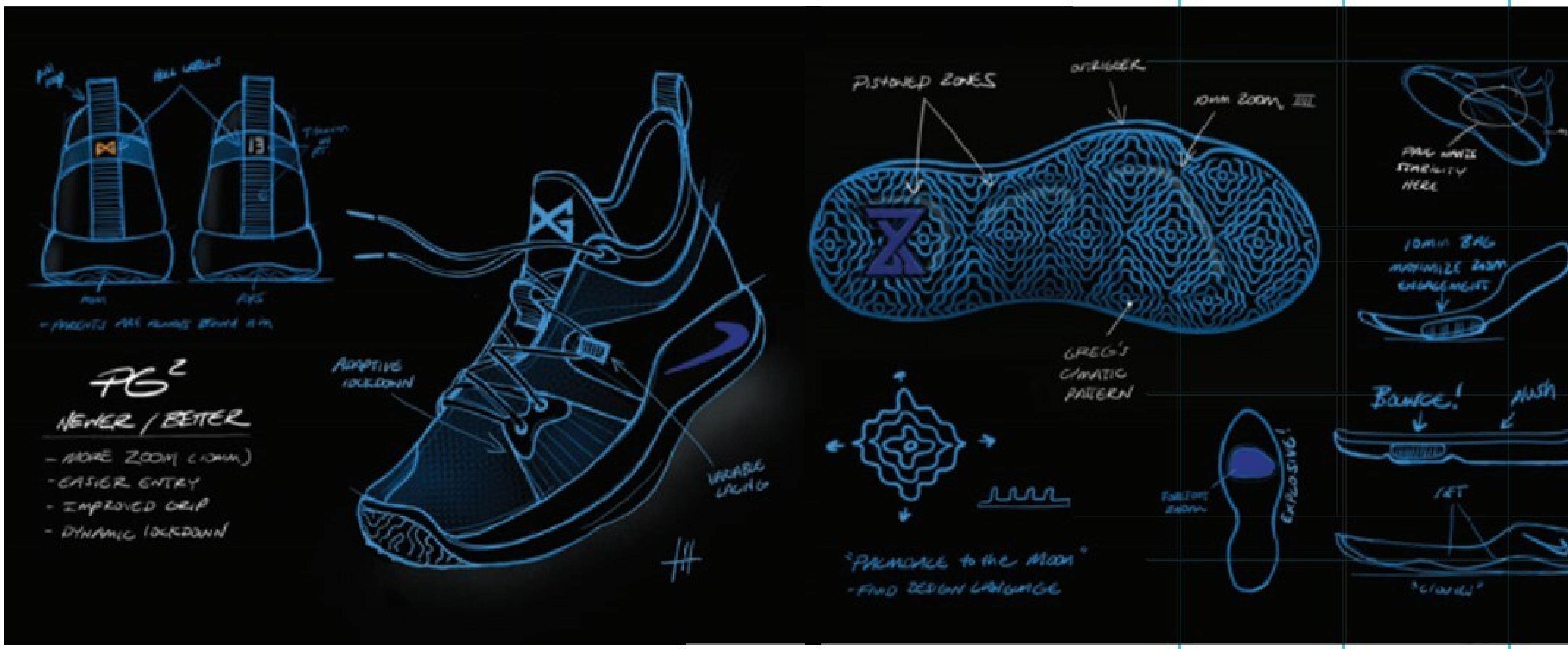
“We’re a fun, interactive gaming company and we like to sort of play,” Lempel says. “This was us playing with the audience and sort of stirring up some excitement and emotion around this. That certainly worked. By the time it became a little more obvious as to what it was, there were a lot of people excited about it and waiting for the shoe.”

When Nike finally revealed the shoe design, it didn’t disappoint. The shiny black patent leather served as the perfect backdrop to the holographic jelly swoosh, with the signature PlayStation 4 controller symbols embedded within.

E3 attendees were delighted to learn that the only way to purchase these new Air Force 1s was to order them from the SNKRs app from the geo-fenced area around the PlayStation tent outside the convention center. Demand proved high, and the shoes sold out in a little over an hour. Nike sold a second batch of the shoes at a pop-up shop during Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta this past month.

Since the release of the new Air Force 1, Lempel has seen them pop up in unexpected places.

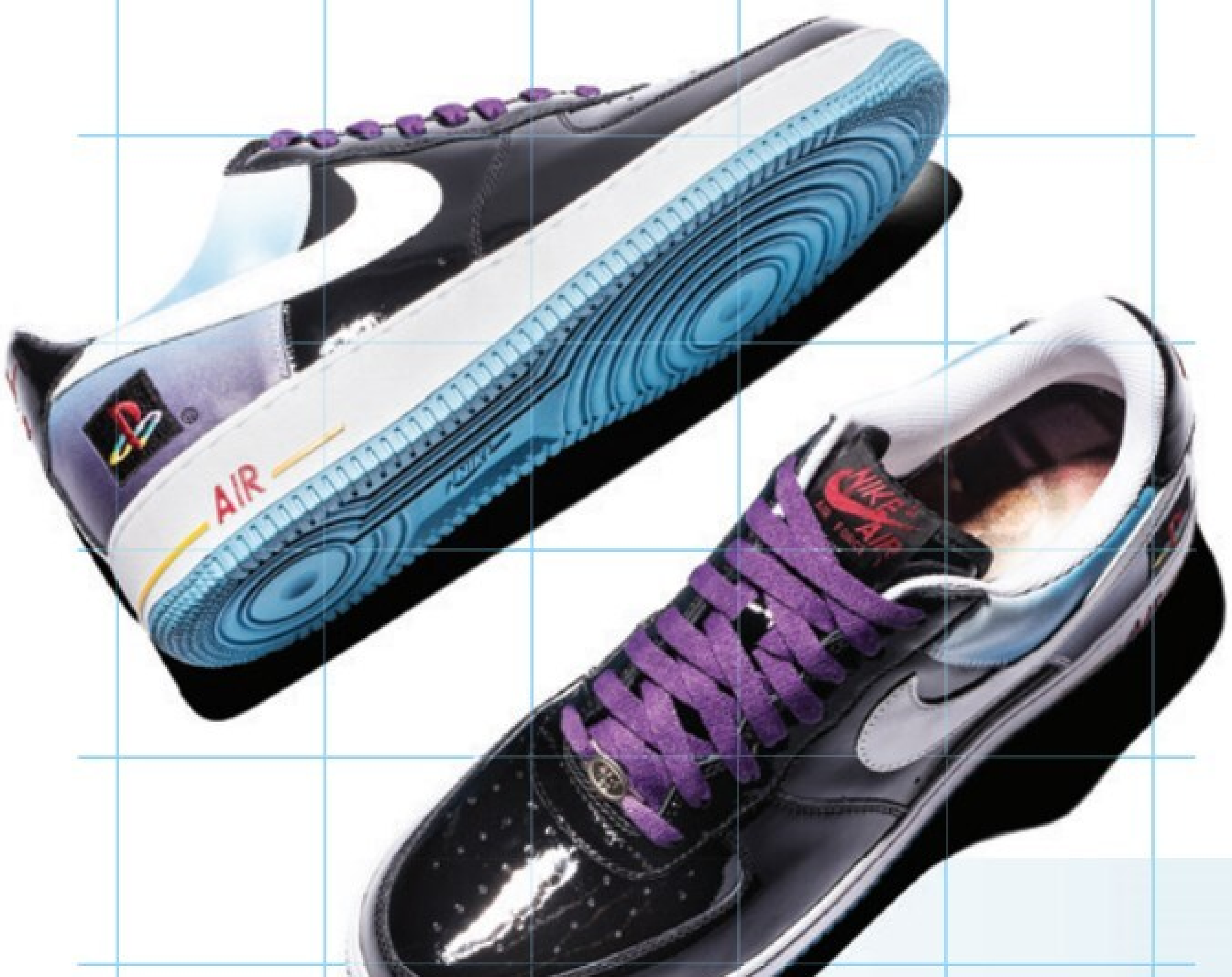
“We were interviewing someone recently and they came in wearing the shoes, so that was great to see,” Lempel says. “It’s great to see their passion for the brand, and it’s great that a consumer with no connection to the company got their hands on them.”



THE O.G. PLAYSTATION SHOE

Nike's first collaboration with PlayStation occured back in 2006, but the manufacturing run was so small the shoes became the stuff of legend. "We had Air Force 1 designed with PlayStation on it, but it wasn't really a consumer offering," says Eric Lempel, PlayStation's senior vice president of marketing. "It went to some people who were close to the company and some people in the company, but it wasn't anything that a consumer could get their hands on unless they were really lucky or won a contest or somehow found a pair somewhere."

That scarcity led to the shoe becoming a highly sought after commodity. The shoes rarely become available in the lucrative resale market, but the last pair that showed up on StockX went for $1,825. With demand like that it's frankly surprising it took the companies another 12 years to join forces again.



SO WHAT'S NEXT?

No plans currently exist for Sony and Nike to embark on another collaboration, so for the time being your best bet to get these shoes is to brave the high prices on StockX, GOAT, or eBay. But in speaking with both companies, it's clear they both view the partnership as a positive experience.

"For us over the past year, we wanted to see where this would go and the response has been really positive," Lempel says. "It opens the door for a lot of possibilities. We like doing things like this that feel authentic and excite our consumers, so I would expect that in the future we'll do other interesting collaborations with brands coming together and doing something special for the consumer."

With several popular gaming franchises within the PlayStation family – think God of War, Uncharted, The Last of Us – Sony has several directions to explore should it choose to build off the success of the Nike collaboration. Its partner in this endeavor has taken note of the amazing reception as well.

"That whole situation with the gaming and how successful that was has really actually taken Nike by storm," Hardman says. "There are a lot of conversations going on now about how the gaming consumer and the basketball consumer is the same kid. A lot of these kids who are playing basketball are playing more NBA 2K than they are real basketball, and they're spending more hours of their lives doing that. That's the reality for kids now – it's not all just on court. They exist in both of those worlds. We've found that to be a very powerful thing, and I think there will be a lot coming in the future that expands on that even more."

Nike dropped the PlayStation x Air Force 1 Lows during E3 2018, and they sold out in just over an hour

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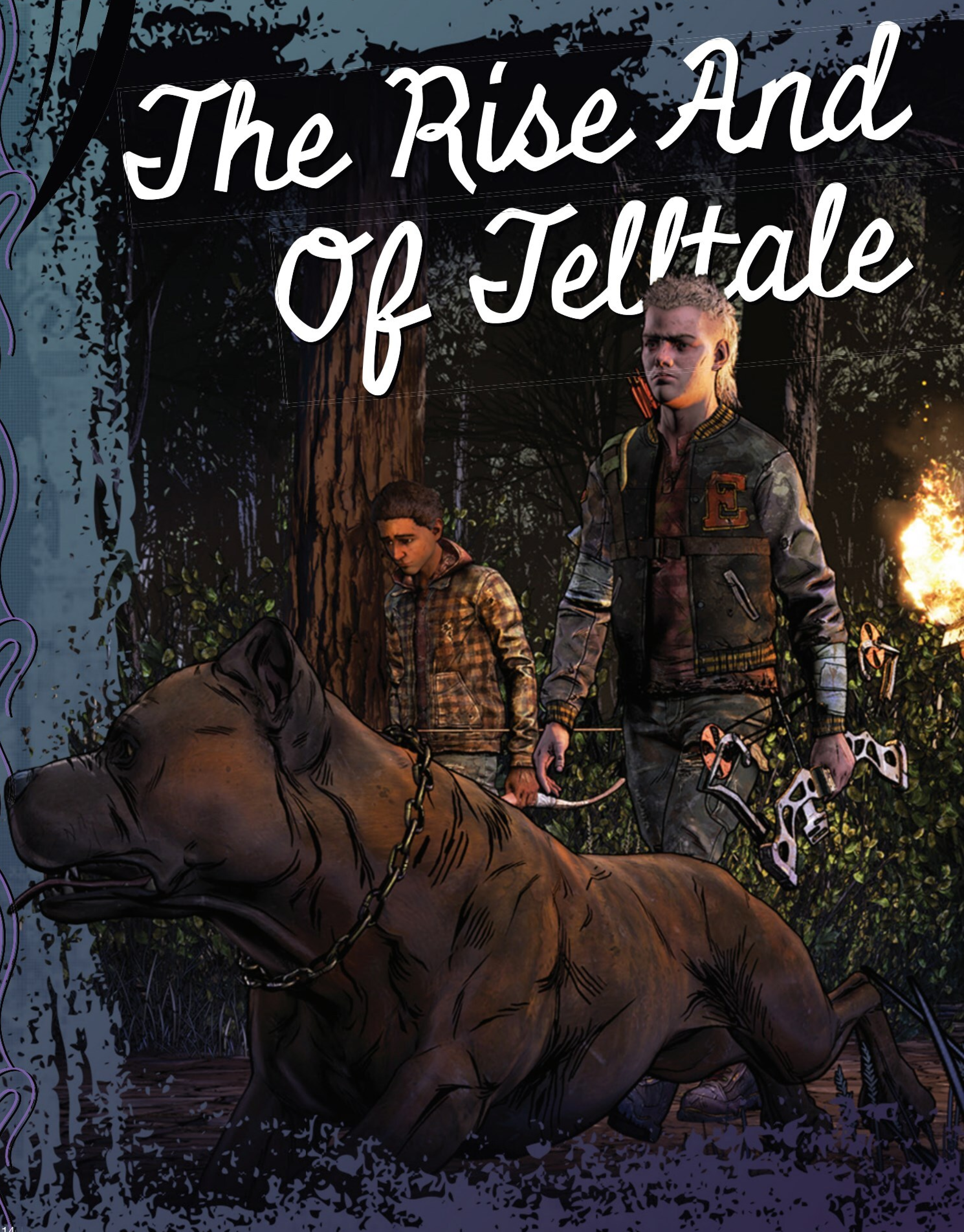
The Rise And Of Telltale



Fall Games

How an award-winning studio met its tragic demise

by Elise Favis

As he waited for the hundreds of employees to trickle into the room, Telltale CEO Pete Hawley cracked some jokes, easing the tension for a moment before discussing the matter at hand. The entire studio had received the meeting invitation just an hour and a half beforehand, and confusion spread quick. “Were you invited?” coworkers asked one another, each wondering about the nature of the meeting. Some were concerned it was a small batch of layoffs, while others were convinced it was good news after hearing talk of new investors. If anything, things looked promising with Telltale’s next big, high-profile projects on the horizon, including the finale to The Walking Dead, a Stranger Things game born out of a Netflix partnership, and the anticipated return of The Wolf Among Us. This made Hawley’s next words all the more shocking.

He informed the group that Telltale Games was laying off 90 percent of its staff as the company headed toward a majority studio closure. Only a small group of 25 would temporarily remain to finish Minecraft: Story Mode’s transition to Netflix. Without any advance warning, everyone else had merely 30 minutes to exit the building before even wrapping their heads around the shutdown. They left without severance, with only nine more days of health insurance, and worst of all, no job. People gasped, coworkers hugged, and some uncontrollably sobbed. Ironically, one former employee describes the dramatic scene as though it came “right out of The Walking Dead” – a game that brought the studio worldwide recognition, but also steered the company toward an untimely demise as it tried to reach those same heights again.

After this fateful meeting, all of Telltale’s upcoming big releases were dead. News of the studio closure rattled the games industry with shock and bafflement, as if this were a death-defying stunt gone terribly wrong.

Only a few years prior, Telltale was at the top of its game, evolving into an adventure-games juggernaut, bringing the genre back to the mainstream, and dispelling the notion that “adventure games are dead.” The company’s work inspired hundreds of other developers to create story-driven games in recent years like Firewatch and Life is Strange. But after oversaturating its market, introducing vigorously quick production cycles, and growing its studio too quickly, it soon became a beast that could no longer be fed.

We spoke to several ex-Telltale employees and executives to better understand what led to the developer’s abrupt closure, how the studio bred a toxic work culture, and how Telltale made such a huge impact on the industry with its revival of a genre from a bygone era.

Seeking Adventure

In the ’80s and ’90s, adventure games were in their prime. Dubbed as the genre’s golden era, this period brought about profitable titles like Full Throttle, King’s Quest, Monkey Island, and more. LucasArts was one of the leaders in the genre, but shifted its focus in the early 2000s as the popularity of adventure games decreased with its lack of evolution and a growing console market. By 2004, LucasArts was no longer making adventure games, focusing solely on its Star Wars properties and canceling its two adventure games that were still in development, Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels and Sam & Max: Freelance Police.

Telltale’s three founders had all worked at LucasArts together on different projects. Troy Molander and Kevin Bruner worked on Grim Fandango, and Dan Connors and Bruner teamed up on Sam & Max: Freelance Police. Bruner joined LucasArts in 1997, nearing the adventure-game genre’s decline. At that time, LucasArts was trying to approach the adventure games business in a pragmatic and realistic way.

“We had to stay on time, we had to stay on budget, and be disciplined about the game we were making. Otherwise we would lose the opportunity,” Bruner says. “I think a lot of that affected our production strategy, our technology strategy, and our development strategy, so that we wouldn’t lose the chance to make the games that we loved to make. And that very much got instilled at Telltale as well.”

As LucasArts changed its vision to move away from adventure games, Molander, Connors, and Bruner felt that despite a market decline, there was a lot of potential in how adventure games could grow and tell meaningful stories. The same year LucasArts changed its direction, the three departed from the company and decided to make adventure games with a start-up of their own.

“We had all this ambition about what next-generation adventure games could look like and then we lost the context of where we could pursue that, so we just decided to start on our own,” Bruner says.

Bruner named the company Telltale, because what he loved most about making adventure games was telling stories. Rather than focusing on some of the more problematic or obtuse puzzle design in older adventure games, Telltale Games introduced novel concepts like branching narrative and an episodic format, giving players dramatic stories to experience. But because adventure games weren’t too profitable at the time, taking this new twist on the genre to store shelves proved difficult.

One of Telltale’s initial goals was to continue Sam & Max adventure games in an episodic format

“Early on at Telltale we tried to get regular publishers involved, but traditional publishers weren’t interested in this kind of content that we wanted to make,” Bruner says. “We had to do it ourselves, and we had to make the most of what we had. There was really just no other way to make the kind of games that we wanted to make.”

Instead of working with publishers, Telltale self-published and digitally distributed its games. The company’s initial goal was to continue LucasArts’ Sam & Max franchise in an episodic format, which it received the license for in 2005. Although none were major successes, Telltale’s games had licenses with small but dedicated fan bases, keeping the studio afloat for its first five years with brands like Sam & Max, Wallace and Gromit, CSI, and Homestar Runner.

During the early days, Telltale’s existence was often shaky. The small team took risks with quirky ideas such as Poker Night at the Inventory, a poker simulation with licensed characters like Strong Bad from Homestar Runner and RED Heavy from Team Fortress 2. According to Bruner, he and the other execs would spend many Christmas breaks planning for the worst, such as a licensing or investor deal failing to come through.

“In the early part of Telltale, there were definitely times where we were like, ‘We don’t know if we’re going to survive,’” Bruner says. “Those were miserable meetings, but then we got a little bit more success under our belt and it was no longer the case that we needed to do that.”

In 2010, Telltale created a viable road to more significant profit when it secured two movie licenses with NBC Universal: Jurassic Park and Back to the Future. This opened the door to bigger opportunities down the line, including comics adaptations from companies like DC Comics and Skybound.

Puzzle Agent

The Walking Dead

A Breakthrough Success

Two years later, Telltale struck gold. The company released The Walking Dead to critical acclaim, receiving numerous game of the year awards. Upon launch, it was Telltale's fastest-selling series, with the first episode amassing one million copies sold in just 20 days. By early 2013, Telltale had earned around $40 million in revenue from The Walking Dead's first season alone. Thanks to the ease of digital distribution and strong storytelling, The Walking Dead became one of the most memorable adventure games ever.

The Walking Dead put Telltale on the map industry-wide, showcasing the studio's strong writing and introducing admirable characters like Clementine and Lee as they attempt to survive in a post-apocalypse. Instead of viewing a zombie outbreak solely through an action-oriented lens, what helped The Walking Dead stand out was its emotional narrative, the concept of non-player characters remembering gripping choices you make, and the feeling of steering the narrative yourself.

"We went way out on a limb when we made [The Walking Dead], and the fact that it worked and became an important game was super special," Bruner says.

According to Telltale's former head of creative communications, Job Stauffer, who got hired around the launch of The Walking Dead, the success of the game gave Telltale the ability to grow quickly, making the small studio not so small anymore.

"Telltale was having grand, mainstream success for the first time," Stauffer says. "With that rise came more cash, more capital, more talent wanting to come join our team, and a period of rapid growth. Before the November 2017 layoffs, we had upwards of about 400 people. We were already a mid-tier developer studio in 2012, and it quadrupled in size by 2018."

This growth and success came with more pressure from above, particularly from Telltale's board of directors and its investors. Although Telltale began as a risk-taking company, it slowly became more risk averse, trying to replicate The Walking Dead's success.

"We wanted bigger and more interesting licenses, so we had bigger and more interesting market opportunities," Bruner says. "And we wanted to make sure that we didn't go backward. We didn't want The Walking Dead to be a fluke, or to be a one-hit wonder."

Revival Of The Walking Dead Final Season

The fate of The Walking Dead's final season, where we would see the end of Clementine's adventure, was in limbo for two months after Telltale's studio closure. With only a skeleton crew left to continue on Minecraft: Story Mode, it was unclear whether we would ever see the long-awaited conclusion to The Walking Dead. Because of its serialized format, fans who bought season passes felt wronged to not receive a full product, and Telltale wasn't transparent on its plans, leaving consumers confused and angry to the point where some harassed ex-Telltale employees, even demanding it be completed without those workers getting paid.

"A lot of the fans were very angry at first. And to be frank, I don't blame them," says former Telltale narrative designer Emily Grace Buck. "They just didn't know where to direct their anger, which is an overall gamer problem that we see often. That anger kind of went everywhere and especially to whoever was most visible, which wasn't the company Twitter account at the time and still isn't. They didn't really know anybody who still works there to be able to talk to."

By mid-November, Skybound Games, the original IP holders of the license, announced that it would work with a group of Telltale's former talented, passionate team members to bring an end to The Walking Dead's seven-year series.

"It's been a ton of work logistically and legally to get us to a place where we're able to roll up our sleeves and get to the actual work," read a statement from Skybound.

Those who already purchased a season pass will not have to pay again. Episode three launched on January 15, and episode four aims to come out on March 26.

Pressure To Recreate The Magic

Telltale proved The Walking Dead wasn’t a one-hit wonder. For example, Minecraft: Story Mode became its bestselling series while Tales from the Borderlands, Batman’s second season, and The Wolf Among Us also received mostly positive reviews.

Bruner says the The Wolf Among Us was “one of the most important games” Telltale made, and it’s easy to see why. Thanks to the Fables license Telltale acquired, The Wolf Among Us brought a creative, detective noir twist to beloved fairytale characters that were exiled to New York City, making fans hungry for more stories in that universe.

Unfortunately, Telltale’s successes weren’t enough to save the studio. The Walking Dead faltered in its later entries, never reaching the high bar of the first season. Other projects like Guardians of the Galaxy sold poorly too, failing to become the smash hits Telltale expected.

“I know that some of the last few games Telltale released did not make as much money as the company had hoped,” former Telltale narrative designer Emily Grace Buck says. “I would not have been surprised if Telltale had teetered out and suffered a slow death. The fact that it got to the point where one [failed] round of funding meant suddenly being done, when the writing had seemed to be on the wall for years, was bizarre.”

The “writing on the wall” came in many forms, including Telltale’s relentless drive to recreate The Walking Dead’s charm in all of its future games. This gave Telltale a signature look and feel, that Bruner still believes had value, despite it being controversial amongst fans and critics.

“As Telltale got bigger and more focused on mega-hits-type things, basically, The Walking Dead was a double-edged sword,” Bruner says. “You can’t duplicate game of the year over and over again. But there was a lot of pressure to duplicate The Walking Dead.”

Still, major license holders that struck deals with Telltale wanted more of the same, hoping to grab that Telltale magic found in The Walking Dead. Telltale’s board of directors put pressure on the company to replicate its prior success, too.

“When we would go out to license holders to get bigger and better licenses, it made sense to be more conservative there,” Bruner says. “You weren’t going to [talk to HBO] and say, “We’re going to run a big new experiment on Game of Thrones.’ [Instead, we would say,] “We’re going to do what we did with The Walking Dead for you.’”

With tired, overused concepts and an unwillingness until its final year to ditch the decade-old in-house engine called the Telltale Tool, the company became less experimental and suffered creative stagnation. Despite the Telltale Tool being what several of the studio’s ex-writers call amazing game-writing software, it wasn’t powerful enough in many other ways. Without a dedicated physics system, if the director wanted an action sequence with a falling bookshelf, animators had to create each element by hand. This pulled at Telltale’s resources and took enormous amounts of time away from the team. The hobbled tech ultimately became one of the leading factors in Telltale’s demise.

Telltale believes that The Wolf Among Us was “one of the most important games” it made, proving that The Walking Dead wasn’t a one hit wonder

“Internally, we talked a lot about transitioning to Unreal, and it was very disruptive to the business,” Bruner says. “We couldn’t shut the business down and not ship a game for months and months or a year to transition the technology.”

Telltale’s games followed a stringent formula that fans and critics grew weary of, and its lack of evolution cost the studio in big ways. By 2013, the games industry entered a new generation with PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, but Telltale struggled to keep up. Its average graphics weren’t evolving, and it was clear Telltale was being surpassed by games made in the same vein like Life is Strange.

Even with big licenses like Game of Thrones, Telltale experienced many failures. Buck believes this is partly due to Telltale’s “fundamental misunderstanding” of its audience. For example, Guardians of the Galaxy is known for its comedic themes through its comics and movies, but Telltale’s take on the universe was more focused on action and dark themes. This made Telltale’s version feel off-tone from the rest of the franchise. Minecraft: Story Mode had similar problems, but they were fixed before release. Although Minecraft is a game that is popular predominantly with children, Telltale first planned for a more juvenile world aimed at teenagers and young adults. In the end, changes came through to target a younger audience. That decision led Minecraft: Story Mode to great success, but it still showcased the company’s disconnect.

“They were targeting an older audience [for Minecraft: Story Mode], trying it make it edgier,” Buck says. “Some of that came from publishing. It seems like some of that came from the board’s requests as well. There were misunderstandings and misinformation at multiple levels that caused things to go that direction.”

Conflict between the production team and executives were apparent as well, as many employees noticed flaws that led Telltale to become less revolutionary than it once was. Creative stagnation led to arguments in meetings and a stressful work culture as Telltale raced to become relevant again.

Lawsuits Against Telltale

Although there isn’t much of Telltale left, the company nonetheless faces two lawsuits: co-founder and former CEO Kevin Bruner is suing the company after he was forced out, and Vernie Roberts, an ex-Telltale employee, is filing a class-action lawsuit regarding the studio’s closure.

Bruner is suing for financial damages, and Roberts’ lawsuit states Telltale violated labor laws by not giving employees any notice of termination until the day of. The latter might prove complicated in court, especially because of variations between California and federal law.

Under the WARN Act, American employers are obligated to give 60 days’ notice to workers prior to plant closings and mass layoffs. However, some exceptions, such as the Unforeseen Business Circumstances Exception, where companies have to lay off large numbers of workers or close facilities immediately after sudden or unexpected circumstances outside the employer’s control (such as loss of a major contract), could work in Telltale’s favor – at least on a federal level.

“It seems pretty clear to me that, under California state law, [Telltale employees] likely will be entitled to 60 days’ worth notice pay,” says Jessica Fink, professor of law at California Western School of Law. “The company may have a defense under federal law, but that defense would not help the company on the state WARN claim because California does not recognize the Unforeseen Business Circumstances Exception.”

Filing for bankruptcy could also give Telltale leverage in court. However, the company has not done that since its closure. Telltale has applied for assignment proceedings, which is an accelerated process similar to bankruptcy. Settling outside of court could be another option, because as Fink suggests, “Telltale probably does not have much by the way of funds for litigation expenses either.”

Game of Thrones

Telltale's Guardians of the Galaxy felt off-tone from the rest of the franchise and sold below expectations

Batman: The Enemy Within

Running Out Of Breath

One way Telltale attempted to become relevant once more was by upping its release schedule, hoping to achieve more lucrative results. Telltale's production cycles became strenuously quick, which Bruner says was because the studio couldn't afford more time. Employees often worked 80-hour weeks to meet deadlines, and last-minute changes were commonplace, sometimes a week before a game would ship.

"Being in a creative room with Kevin [Bruner] could, in a lot of instances, be very difficult," Buck says. "He was known for asking for extremely large changes very close to ship date that would mandate crunch for a huge percentage of the studio, which is obviously not ideal. Yet at the same time, he was under a lot of pressure from the board that wanted certain types of products to come out."

Bruner compares Telltale's episodic and serialized format to *Saturday Night Live*, where the show must go on, whether you're prepared or not. With season passes, Telltale needed to work hard and fast to get consumers their content, but it was often done under duress and at the cost of the team's mental health.

"For me, at an executive level, all the way down to the animator – if you see an opportunity to make the game better, and you know it's going to ship in a week and you care about the content, it's really hard to walk away from the content and just say, 'You know what? This is as good as it's going to get. I'm going home,'" Bruner says. "We tried to create an environment where you really had to do that to survive at Telltale, because we didn't have these three-year-long production cycles."

Because this fast-paced culture was a norm at Telltale, several employees suffered as they tried to keep up. Stauffer says the way Telltale was run was "not always in the interest of the health of the employees."

"I was in a public position where, I was always the one going out [doing PR] and being excited about our game," Staffer says. "That's great when you're a publisher and you put out maybe one or two games a year, but at Telltale it was happening multiple times per month."

When an anonymous former Telltale writer started out at Telltale in 2013, he describes it as having a "malleable, still-indie spirit" where production staff often tried on different hats, and crossover occurred through different departments. Like many, he loved working at Telltale, but there was an ebb and flow of good and bad moments.

During the development of one of Telltale's games, for example, he was taken off the project and demoted, after "pushing an idea too hard" with the wrong people. But he's far from the only one who faced blowback after speaking up, especially during executive reviews.

"There was definitely a culture of fear for a long time at Telltale, especially when Kevin Bruner was still working there," Buck says. "If they didn't like what you had done, even if it was exactly what they had asked for, the chances of you being kicked off a project or demoted were extremely high."

High-level talent noticed the warning signs and left for more lucrative opportunities at companies like Ubisoft, or to start game studios of their own. Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin, project leads on The Walking Dead's first season, went on to make Firewatch. Tales from the Borderlands writer Adam Hines left to make Oxenfree. Even The Walking Dead's design director, Dave Grossman, departed to work on Day of the Tentacle Remastered. These exits left a leadership vacuum at Telltale and only gave the company more competition.

The Growing Competition

The first time an anonymous Telltale writer noticed that the studio could be in trouble was during E3 2016. After watching showcases from different publishers like Sony and Microsoft, he worried that Telltale's biggest competitors were beating Telltale at their own game. Massive triple-A action games like God of War were putting more of a focus on emotional storytelling, and even smaller titles that were announced earlier, like Night in the Woods, were telling interesting stories in experimental ways Telltale was not.

"I remember E3 2016 really feeling like a turning point where you suddenly saw that a lot of studios' presentations with games that were really telling their stories with their characters," he says. "I saw that, and I said, 'Oh, this isn't a good sign.'"

Telltale based its business off huge media licenses, giving it a triple-A aura, but its strict budgets and scope limitations kept it from being able to compete with those bigger studios due to its troubled technology and lower manpower. Telltale could potentially attract huge audiences with licenses for Batman and Minecraft, but the company's cookie-cutter approach left little variety from one game to the next.

"A problem we were running into is, you know, you look at who we were actually competing with, which was the Firewatches and Oxenfrees of the world, and those were teams of 10 people," he says. "Meanwhile, we were trying to keep a studio afloat of like 350 people."

By 2017, Telltale was diligently trying to set itself on a new path to success with new CEO Pete Hawley. With a partnership with Netflix, the team was to begin working on a Stranger Things game and a Netflix port for Minecraft: Story Mode. Although it felt like Telltale was finding some solid ground again, 25 percent of the team was laid off later that year due to continuing financial burdens.

"I think the November 2017 layoffs felt like dodging a close call," he says. "Everybody felt like, 'Okay, the company just took a heavy blow.'"

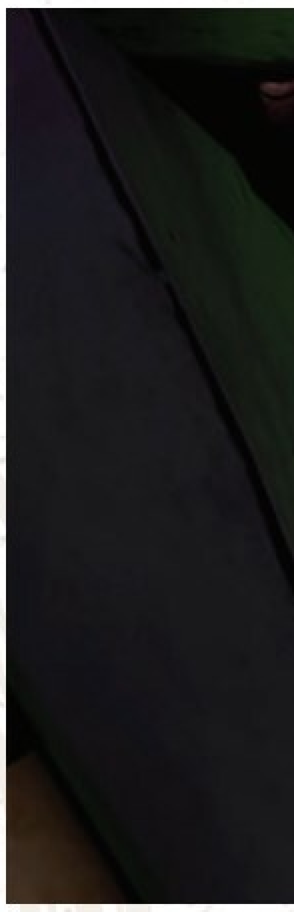
"Obviously the 2017 layoffs were not a good sign," Buck adds. "A large layoff like that never is. At the same time, I think there had been a level of concern internally for quite a while."

Despite shrinking the team and a promising new licensing agreement, Telltale's biggest and final blow was just around the corner.

Tales from the Borderlands

Minecraft: Story Mode is Telltale's bestselling game of all time, beating out even the company's crown jewel, The Walking Dead

Poker Night at the Inventory launched in 2010, when Telltale was still taking risks with storytelling and game mechanics



Keeping Game Industry Leaders Accountable

Toxic workplace conditions in the games industry have been widespread, making Telltale's problematic crunch periods commonplace in the industry. Is there a way to keep industry leaders accountable? Telltale's former narrative designer Emily Grace Buck believes unionization is one step toward advocating for game designers' rights.

"I do think that moving towards a union is a good idea," she says. "I've joined my local Game Workers Unite and I think that organization is doing a lot of good work to bring visibility to the issues developers deal with internationally, but in the United States, it's a very difficult country to advocate for workers. I think there's a lot of interest, there's a lot of excitement around it, which is impressive and important especially given today's political climate that is extremely anti-unions."

The Game Workers Unite organization is rallying together games industry professionals so they can advocate for their rights and attempt unionization.

"Workers should never feel at the behest of company bosses, a separate body with expertise in employment law that would represent the worker is crucial in case any grievance were to occur," says Marijam Didžgalvytė, chair of communications committee for Game Workers Unite International. "Yet, it is a sad reality that in the 50 years of the games industry history, unionization has never taken root. Well, it is time to change that and challenge the culture of crunch, harassment, outsourcing, insecure contracts, and so on."

According to Didžgalvytė, if Telltale's workplace had been unionized, severance pay would have had to have been negotiated in the event of a mass layoff. "A union cannot prevent mass firings," she says. "But it would be there to ensure that the company follows up on legal proceedings protecting the workers in such a circumstance."

The Final Blow

After investors AMC, Smilegate, and Lionsgate pulled funding, Telltale was forced to begin its shutdown last September. Now, in its final days, Telltale has no more production staff, faces two lawsuits, and is removing several of its games from digital storefronts like Steam as the company liquefies its assets.

Telltale's unexpected closure was, according to its former employees, handled extremely poorly in comparison to previous layoffs. Without even a day's notice for workers, let alone two weeks, Telltale executives had to hurriedly shut down the studio when no money was left.

"It should never have happened, and it should never happen again, and I honestly believe that this closure, as big of a disaster as it is, is the death rattle of the way we produce and create video games," Stauffer says.

Telltale's final layoffs came as a surprise not just to its employees, but to the executive staff as well. Bruner, who had departed from the company a year prior, learned about the closure eight hours before it happened. HR personnel were working vigorously the previous night until 2 a.m. to put together termination packets for the hundreds of employees that would soon be jobless.

"I was completely taken by surprise at the closure," Bruner says. "It was unthinkable to me that the studio would shut down. The notion that you would go full-speed and then stop was just unfathomable to me; it's certainly not how I run a business. I don't know the details of the weeks that led up to that decision and how that decision was made, but I don't know how you don't at least give people two weeks."

However, the problems leading up to the closure, from financial instability to crunching its employees, are far from exclusive to Telltale. Rockstar's co-founder Dan Houser boasting last year that the studio's writers worked 100-hour weeks to complete Red Dead Redemption II is just one example of an industry-wide crisis that prioritizes game production first and work-life balance second. Other studios like Blizzard, Bungie, Naughty Dog, Electronic Arts, and more fell into the same problematic pattern where employees had to work under strenuous crunch in an attempt to ship games out on time.

"I'd say that there were no issues that Telltale dealt with that were unique to Telltale," Buck says. "Trying to blame any one of those issues on why it closed or any one department or any one person is really futile."

Although Telltale's journey has come to an end, many of its former employees have moved on to new positions at other game studios, like Insomniac Games, Blizzard, and Ubisoft, where they continue to make meaningful stories. Earlier this year, Buck started a game-writing mentorship program called FirstShot.

"It's for people who have either never published a game as a narrative designer or for a writer that has been working in games, or a writer who has never made a game before, or who are new to both," Buck says. "They can apply for this program and I will help mentor them through the process of making their own game."

Whether they are working in the games industry still or not at all, Telltale's ex-staff are finding new beginnings. With its talent dispersed now to different studios, we can be hopeful that more of Telltale's storytelling gold will appear in new and fantastic ways in the industry's future. Looking back, although it came to a rocky conclusion, Telltale's games made us cry, laugh, and gasp with well-crafted tales and characters. Telltale fans will remember that.

"I hope that the things that Telltale did the best are what it's remembered for," Bruner says. "And the things that we certainly did not do the best at are – I don't want to say forgotten about because we don't want to forget about them – but that those are not its sole legacy." ◆

Batman: The Enemy Within

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The Genuine Comedian

How one Youtuber used his hobby to break into the industry

SungWon Cho has made a name for himself as one of gaming's funniest Youtubers, with over a million subscribers tuning in to watch video-game focused skits and gags. He's also branched out into voice work for games like Apotheon and this year's Yakuza spinoff, Judgment. We talked with Cho about his beginnings on Tumblr and how he made the jump into professional voice work.

Name:
SungWon Cho
(ProZD)

Occupation:
YouTube Creator and
Voice Actor

Twitter:
@Prozdkp

YouTube:
ProZD

interview by Javy Gwaltney

How long have you been gaming?
I've been playing games since I was 4 or 5. Super Mario Bros. and Duck Hunt. That's basically how I started gaming.

How did you get into Vine and YouTube comedy?
I would do these audio posts on Tumblr that basically were voice-acting practice and little comedy bits. I built my platform on there first and that led to Vine, because I decided on a whim to try that and that exploded. I already had a YouTube channel, but after I jumped back into it after my stint with Vine, it grew from that.

What was it about Vine that appealed to you?
What I loved about Vine (RIP) is you could convey so much of an idea within that time constraint. You cut down the unnecessary filler and can convey a joke in its purest form. The best people on there would do it so effectively and make it feel like it's more than six seconds and just give you the best form of the joke so quickly.

How long does it take to set up your videos?
I would say, starting from scripting to editing, less than a day. Usually a couple of hours or so. But it also depends on what the script is.

What is it that your fans tell you that they like about the content you create?
I think because they're fellow nerds; they just connect with a lot of the things I make fun of. I love games and anime and things like that. I have been ingrained in it…I am one of those big old nerds. I think they connect to that and the comedy of that sort of thing.

Are voice acting and content creation videos your full-time job?
Yeah, pretty much all I do for income is voice-over and Youtube.

How did you make the jump to voice acting?
I don't think a lot of people know that I was doing voice-over stuff before the whole YouTube/Vine explosion. Five years ago, I got a role in Apotheon because the voice director, Deven Mack, found a video I did on YouTube that had my voice in it and sent me an email out of the blue to audition for two characters. I got the main bad guy in it, Zeus. That was my first sort of professional voice-over thing. If you do well with one director, he recommends you to another director. I get a lot of direct auditions and offers now because people know me from another director, or they've seen my work and they want me to be involved. A lot of voice-over is who you know, really.

Do you prefer Youtube videos over voice acting?
I will say voice-over is what I'm most passionate about, but what I do like about YouTube is that I have full creative control. I can produce whatever type of video I want and not have to answer to a boss. That's what I enjoy about it.

How did you train for voice-work?
When I first started out in 2012, I was bad. Really all it's been has been practice. I decided that for Tumblr I was going to post one clip a day no matter what, because I really wanted to get better and just create something. I had just graduated college and knew I wanted to be a professional voice actor. I also knew I wasn't going to accomplish that by sitting around, so I just posted a scene or a clip every day. You do that for a couple of years, and you get way better in a short amount of time. I always tell people that practicing is very important even if you're starting from a baseline. I had a knack for a doing different kinds of voices, but the acting part came from a lot of practice.

Any advice to those looking to become a content creator or voice artist?
I think putting yourself out there in any way will benefit you. YouTube is definitely saturated with people who want to be voice actors, but with that said, there's no harm in making your own content and putting out there. You never know what will happen. There's no guarantee anything will come out of it but if you're good and you make good content, then there's a higher chance someone will eventually discover you.

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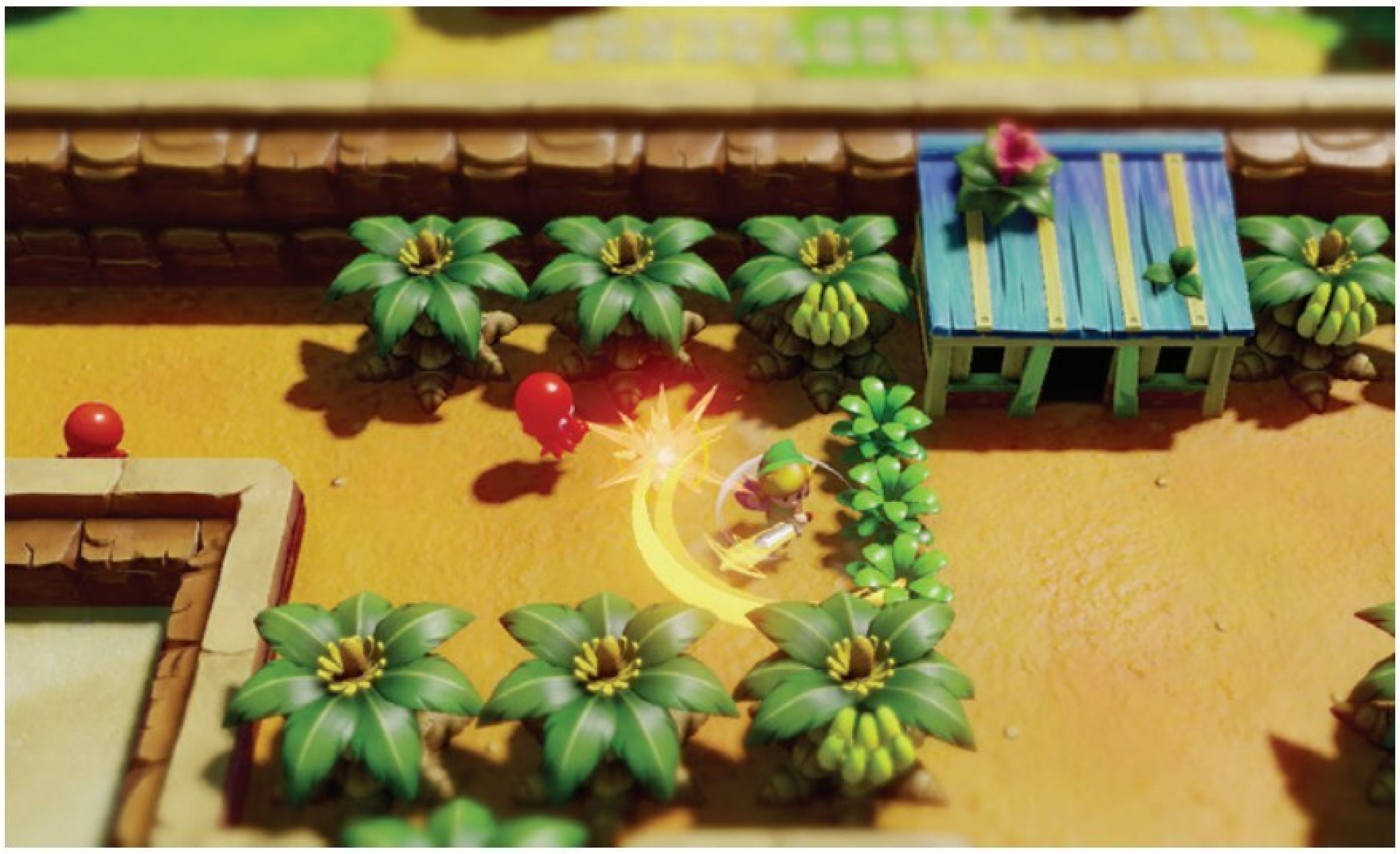
What's Next For The Switch?

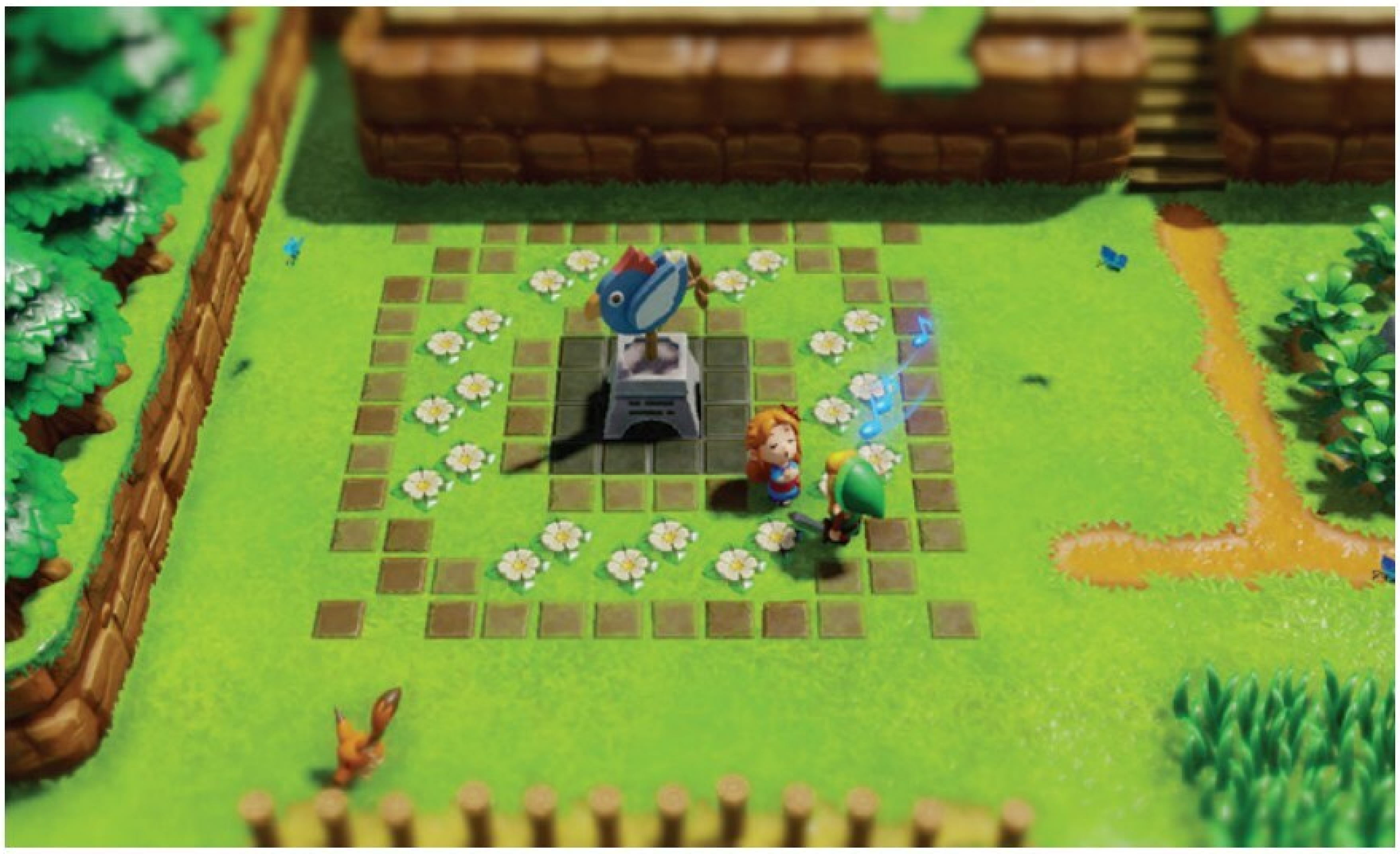
Nintendo showcases a promising lineup for its growing console

Nintendo is riding a wave of fan enthusiasm, as strong recent releases and a parade of excellent ports continue to swell the Switch library. That trend doesn't seem to be coming to an end anytime soon, as a recent Nintendo Direct shined the spotlight on several big titles.

In addition to the surprising release of a battle royale-inspired Tetris, we learned that Dragon Quest Builders 2, Daemon X Machina, and Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 are all set for release this summer, and Dragon Quest XI hits this fall. Nintendo also announced Rune Factory 5 (and a Rune Factory 4 remaster), Box Boy + Box Girl, an action/RPG from Square Enix titled Oninaki, and others.

Amid the announcements, here are the biggest Switch highlights from the showcase. *by Game Informer Staff*





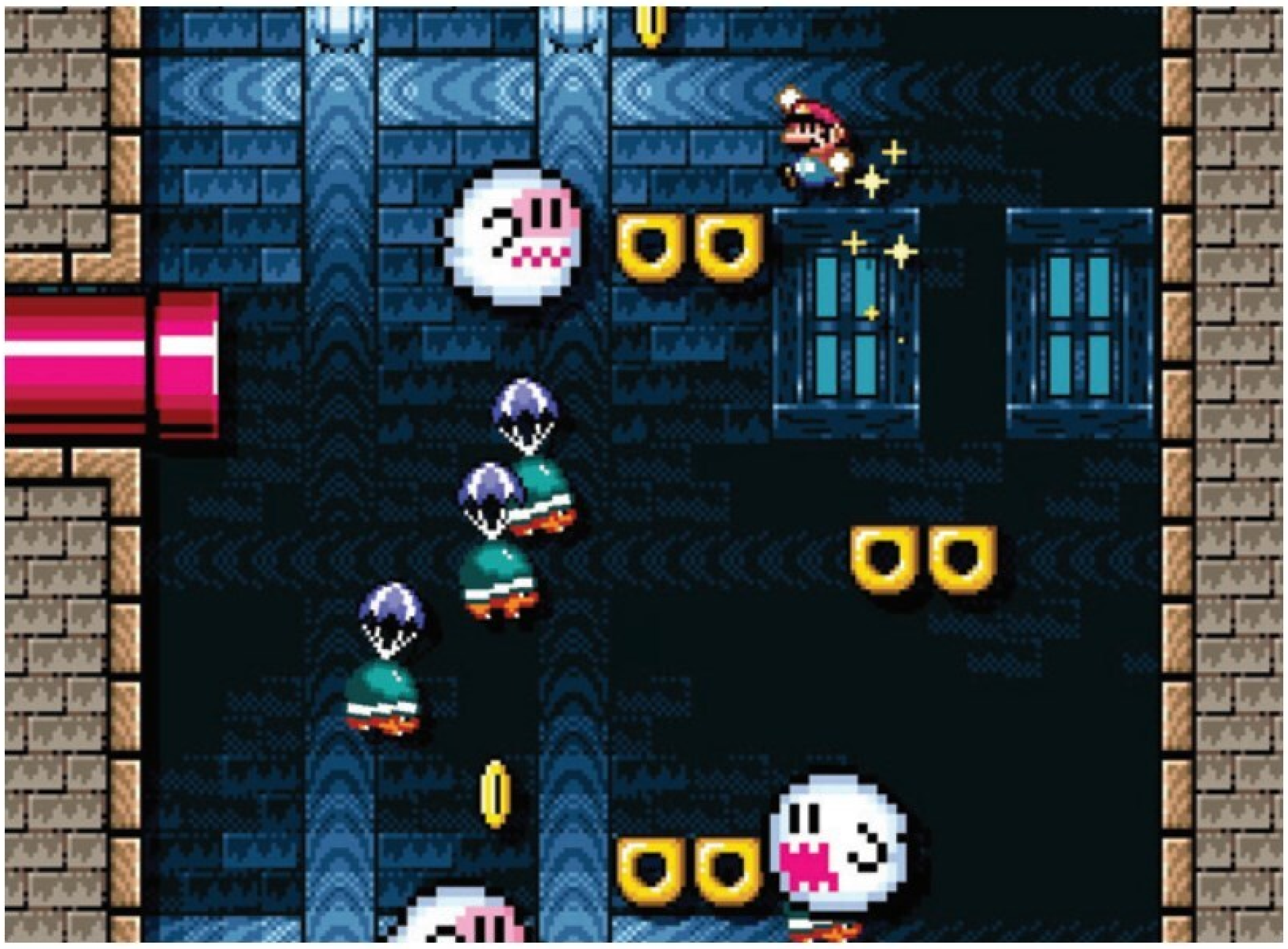
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening

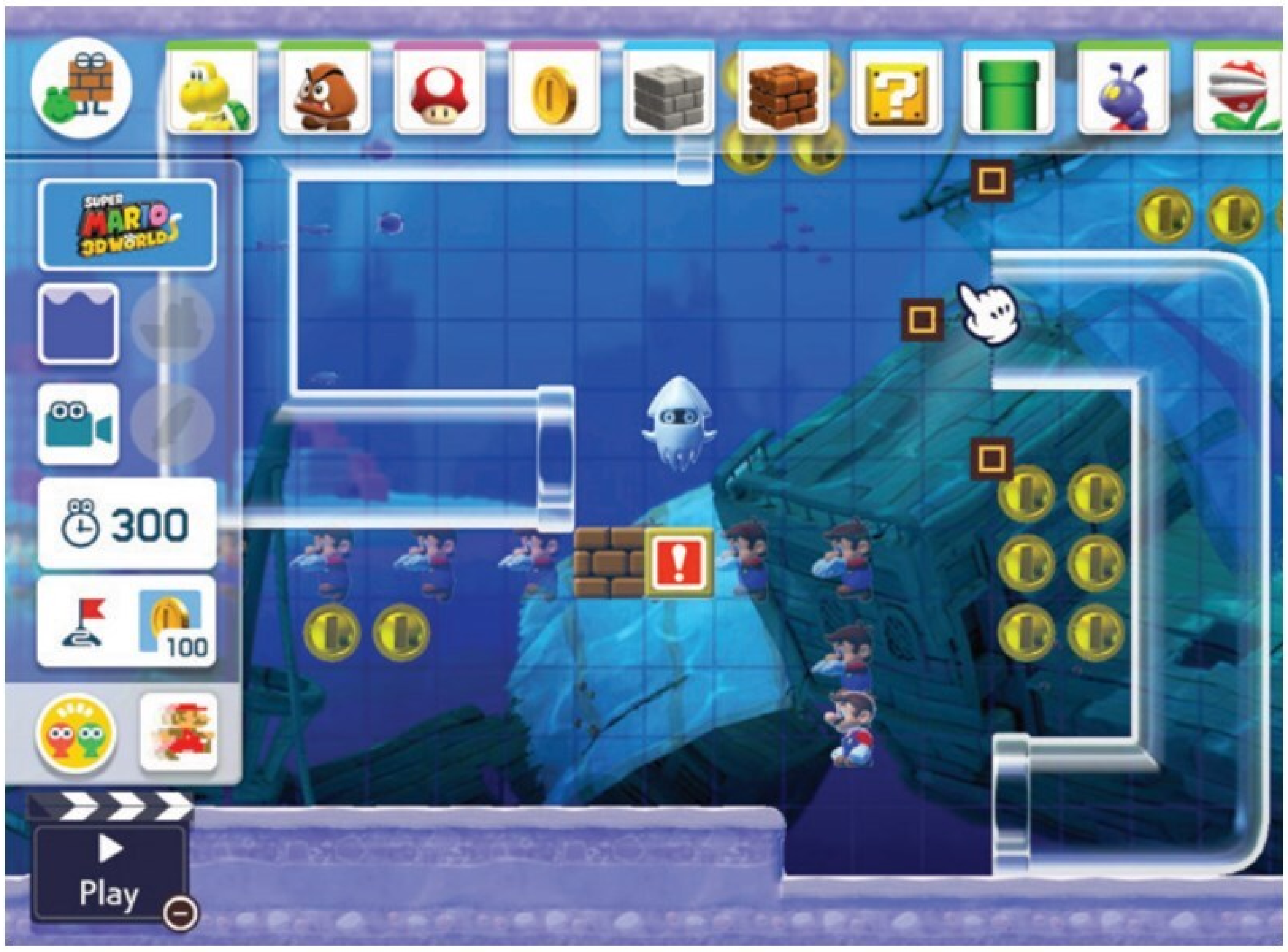
Release: 2019

In the fall of 1993, Nintendo launched The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening for the Game Boy. This portable adventure was surprisingly deep for a Game Boy title and remains beloved by fans for its creative puzzle design and strange island setting. Later this year, long-time followers can relive this adventure alongside newcomers when Nintendo releases a remake of the classic top-down adventure, complete with a brand-new art style that seems to be inspired by woodblock miniatures.

Link's Awakening takes place after the events of the SNES classic A Link to the Past, and sees a shipwrecked Link wash ashore on the mysterious Koholint Island. Originally intended to be a modified version of A Link to the Past, the original Link's Awakening slowly morphed into its own game as the development team stayed late after work to tinker with their unsanctioned passion project. As a result, Link's Awakening is an oddball entry in the series. Not only does it feature a number of bizarre new characters, it also references popular Nintendo franchises like Mario, Yoshi, and Kirby. However, Link's Awakening is also fairly significant as it is the first entry in the series to feature a fishing minigame, allow Link to grab cuccos, and integrate musical instruments into its story.

Nintendo hasn't offered many details on the Switch remake, but the areas we've seen look faithful to the original. We don't expect a radical departure from the original's design, but we hope Nintendo takes this opportunity to add some quality-of-life improvements, such as the ability to equip more than two items at a time. The original Game Boy version was incredibly successful, selling over five million copies and reportedly helping boost sales of Nintendo's handheld. We're excited to see if Link's Awakening repeats that success when the remake comes to Switch later this year.





Super Mario Maker 2

Release: June

Since the launch of the Switch, fans have clamored for the Wii U's beloved custom-content creator, Super Mario Maker, to make the leap forward to Nintendo's current flagship system. Nintendo is finally giving would-be level designers what they've been asking for while adding a few much-requested features and a host of new tools. Thanks to the single-screen nature of Switch, Nintendo is replacing the touchscreen controls of the Wii U and 3DS original with a system that resembles weapon wheels. Wheels exist for placing enemies, power-ups, platforms, and other objects. One major addition in the reveal trailer is the ability to place sloped surfaces, allowing Mario to slide through lines of enemies to rack up points and one-ups. You can also program vertical movements for the camera if you're creating a level with an auto-scroll, and create stages that take place in ghost houses or a winter setting.

Super Mario Maker 2 introduces multiple new elements to experiment with, including the Angry Sun from Super Mario Bros. 3, giant Piranha Plants, platform movement you can program, and the cat suit from Super Mario 3D World. Cat Mario can climb up walls, opening new level-design opportunities in this sequel. This inclusion signals a new game style to create levels within, as Super Mario 3D World is included despite using a 2D perspective. Outside of this new game to use for creation, we've only seen Super Mario Bros., Super Mario Bros. 3, Super Mario World, and New Super Mario Bros. U, so it remains a mystery if any other additional styles like Super Mario Bros. 2 will show up. Thankfully, we don't have to wait long for more information on this, as well as any upgrades to how players can share their creations with friends and strangers. Super Mario Maker 2 launches on Switch this June.

Astral Chain

Release: August 30

The newest collaboration between Nintendo and PlatinumGames is a slick science-fiction action title set in a brand new universe. In the distant future, a diverse melting pot of a city called the Ark has become overrun with crime, prompting the creation of a special police task force called Neuron. Players have the choice of picking a male or female Neuron officer to keep the Ark safe, with the other character playing a role in the story as a twin Neuron agent.

When an extradimensional portal opens up in the Ark, the Neuron force is tasked with using their special capabilities to investigate crimes and enforce laws using a robotic partner named Legion to defend against an incoming alien menace. The title is directed by Takahisa Taura, the gameplay director of 2017's Nier: Automata, and supervised by Bayonetta director Hideki Kamiya, boasting a pedigree that not many action games can match.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Release: July 26

Intelligent Systems and Nintendo finally revealed some concrete details about the latest installment of Fire Emblem, Three Houses. While the series' fascination with warring nobles in fantastical settings remains, Three Houses takes a Harry Potter-inspired approach this go-round to foster connections between the player and the characters. As a professor at Garreg Mach's officer academy, your job is to manage the education of one of the noble houses of the school, including the house's eventual ruler. You must teach them the ways of war and encourage friendships between them before taking them out to the battlefield to test their mettle. Three Houses' education approach could be the breath of air the series needs to keep things fresh and we're excited to get our hands on it this summer.

RESIDENT EVIL 2

Most remakes slap a new coat of paint over a game's existing architecture and call it a day, but Capcom went the extra mile with Resident Evil 2. The development team poured a new game's worth of effort into redesigning Resident Evil 2's action, level layouts, puzzles, and story. The result is an instant survival-horror classic. We spoke with director Kazunori Kadoi about how the team landed on the third-person shooter controls, why Raccoon City is so big now, and how Resident Evil 7 influenced this remake's development.

by Ben Reeves

At what point in development did you know you wanted to remove the tank controls and recreate RE 2 as a shooter? Was that an easy decision?
During the initial development, we considered including the option to switch between tank controls and the over-the-shoulder camera. But as development progressed, we found ourselves leaning toward the over-the-shoulder camera more and more, finding ourselves enjoying those frightening encounters with the undead much more from that perspective. We inevitably decided that having one defined camera provided enough entertainment and made the final decision to spend all of our energy and effort refining the gameplay from that angle. We felt that was the correct direction to take in creating a high-quality product, rather than splitting our energy in two different directions and potentially not having the time to refine and hone both of them.

Raccoon City was always portrayed as a small town in the past, but in the opening scene it looks like a bustling metropolis. What made you want to make the city bigger?
When the player spends time walking around the city, we wanted them to feel the scale and breadth of the city if they looked off into the distance. As a result, we decided to make the setting and environment much bigger than the original game.

Resident Evil 2 takes place in November 1998, but the USB flash device wasn't invented until 1999. How does the Raccoon Police department have access to such advanced technology?
The standard format USB actually did exist back in 1998. The badge-shaped one that exists in the game is not a flash-memory version, but an authentication dongle key, which is technology that existed at that time.

What's the secret to balancing a game's resources so that players never completely run out, but always feel like they're starving for supplies?
Not much of a secret, aside from a lot of trial and error! It's about playing the game over and over and over and… over. It's about constantly tweaking the game along the way until it feels like the right level of balance that you mentioned.

How much did Resident Evil 7: Biohazard's development influence your work on this game?
It definitely helped that we had built our own in-house proprietary RE Engine. We were constantly able to update it along the way during Resident Evil 7: Biohazard to accommodate the development team's needs and streamline a lot of the work to be faster and, in turn, more efficient. This gave us time to spend our resources elsewhere in making sure we were able to create a smooth combat system that was both fun and fitting of the survival-horror world.

Mr. X is incredibly terrifying. We'd love to know some of the game logic behind him. Are there two Tyrants running around the police station? What other types of tricks did you play on us to make his presence so unnerving?
It's just one Tyrant lurking around, although the idea of having multiple Tyrants roaming around is an interesting and terrifying concept. We did want to make sure its presence was felt through an expansive area, so we implemented things like making him very aggressive in tracking the player down if he/she picked up specific items. This logic kicks in no matter how far Tyrant may be from the player.

There are certain parts of Leon and Claire's runs where their story intersects and it seems to suggest that both runs happen at the same time, but then you also have those characters fighting the same bosses under similar situations. Are these two stories supposed to be happening at the same time?
Without getting into a discussion over what is and isn't canon, I can say our view is that we wanted whichever scenario the player is currently in to be the main story arc. So, for example, if you're playing Claire's story, our take is that the happenings of Leon's story are not occurring at the same time.

Are there any Resident Evil games you wouldn't want to remake?
Hmm, interesting question. I'm sure this is more of a question for the fans, since everybody has a different sense of nostalgia for certain games depending on which genres they prefer or even what years they grew up or experienced Resident Evil. Some fans probably would love to see their favorite games remade with modern technology and I could see some other fans wanting to keep their favorite games in the purist form. From a developer's standpoint, I'm not against remaking any game.

THRONEBREAKER: THE WITCHER TALES

Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales began as the single-player component of the Gwent spinoff game, but grew into something far more ambitious. Thronebreaker is similar to its multiplayer sister in many ways, but also deviates from it significantly to make it more approachable as a standalone experience. We spoke to Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz, game director for both Gwent and Thronebreaker, about how the expansion came to be. *by Suriel Vazquez*

Thronebreaker plays with a different set of cards and rules than Gwent, alongside abilities that are larger and more powerful. How did the team arrive at this approach?
Our approach consisted of two aspects – quality and practicality. First, we came to a conclusion that both of the games needed to have a split design. With Gwent, we had to be sure we could update the game frequently and introduce a lot of card balance changes. Single-player games, however, require different treatment – changing even one card in Thronebreaker could have had cascading effects all throughout the game, so everything had to be finished by launch.

The team and I also discussed how crazy we could go with card values and abilities in a single-player title. Since your opponents are A.I., there is no need for cards to work in a competitive format, so instead we wanted to make sure the encounters are compelling and avoid repetitiveness.

How do you go about constructing a new story in the Witcher universe? Do you start with an arc you want to tell then look at the books to see what might fit, or are do you look at the books first?
The process began with long brainstorming and lore research sessions. As the five specific factions we have in Gwent only clashed in very specific times in the Witcherverse history, we paid a lot of attention to the timeline and the area in which the story unfolds.

The choice of protagonist was a big one. Since Gwent is a game of armies clashing on a battlefield, our main character had to be a leader. Not only that, they also had to have a good reason to build up their army as the game progressed. In the end, we came to the conclusion that Queen Meve was the perfect fit. She's a charismatic leader who's operated during the second war with Nilfgaard. This also enabled us to justify gameplay mechanics such as deckbuilding and progression.

Once we decided on the main character, I prepared a general story arc and made sure it didn't contradict any of the books – Meve was mentioned several times but didn't actually have much screen time. This allowed us to build a consistent story that filled in the blanks with our own ideas for events and characters.

Some of the puzzles really stretch what you can do inside of Gwent. Was there any concept or puzzle that ended up not making the cut?
Oh, there were multiple. There was one in Mahakam and it required players to memorize a specific set of cards to later recreate in another puzzle – much like Twin Memories in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. I can also recall a puzzle which involved trying to ground a flying monster. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, those puzzles didn't make the final cut.

How did the team balance the ratio of puzzle encounters to regular skirmishes on each map? It feels like the puzzles end up not being as frequent as the campaign nears its end.
Like I mentioned, there were a few puzzles cut here and there. The ratio was supposed to be similar across all of the maps, but unfortunately, we had to cut the scope down a little bit. The encounter ratio in Lyria is closest to what the team has originally intended. It was our proving grounds.

Thronebreaker and the launch of Gwent's big Homecoming update, which included a number of major changes, happened at the same time. How did the Thronebreaker team adapt?
Those major changes ended up really benefiting Thronebreaker in terms of quality and the overall feeling of the game. That's not to say the development of Homecoming wasn't a challenging period – quite the contrary. All encounters and cards we'd already had for Thronebreaker had to be redesigned, and encounter implementation was blocked until the basic systems were remade into new visuals and game core. That meant we had to focus on paper design and ended up having less time to actually implement them. ◆

Indie Devs Band Together At Thunderful

Indie-game development is difficult, and it's been fascinating to watch the ways different teams have confronted this challenge in recent years, especially the business elements of the process. This month, I checked out several games from Thunderful, a label that has risen up to support indie studios on the publishing side of things, letting them keep their focus on development. The group has some impressive titles on the way, and I spent an afternoon playing two of the most promising. *by Matt Miller*

I'm personally most excited by **Lonely Mountains: Downhill**, from Megagon Industries. Those with a good memory may remember this column singing the praises of this mountain-biking game over a year ago. At the time, the incredible control precision and quiet natural aesthetic really caught my attention. All these months later, the game is only looking better. I predict this one as a big breakout hit for skill enthusiasts, streamers, and speed runners; the game takes only moments to grasp, but the potential for fun and depth is enormous.

Players control a mountain biker as he descends through a variety of gorgeous mountain locales, each with their own flora, fauna, and geographical nuances. In terms of gameplay, Downhill feels like a delightful melding of old-school Marble Madness and the precision control of a Trials game. Through braking, sprint pedaling, and tiny changes in direction, you gain control over the smallest shifts in your bike's direction and speed, and there's a great freedom to the flow of play.

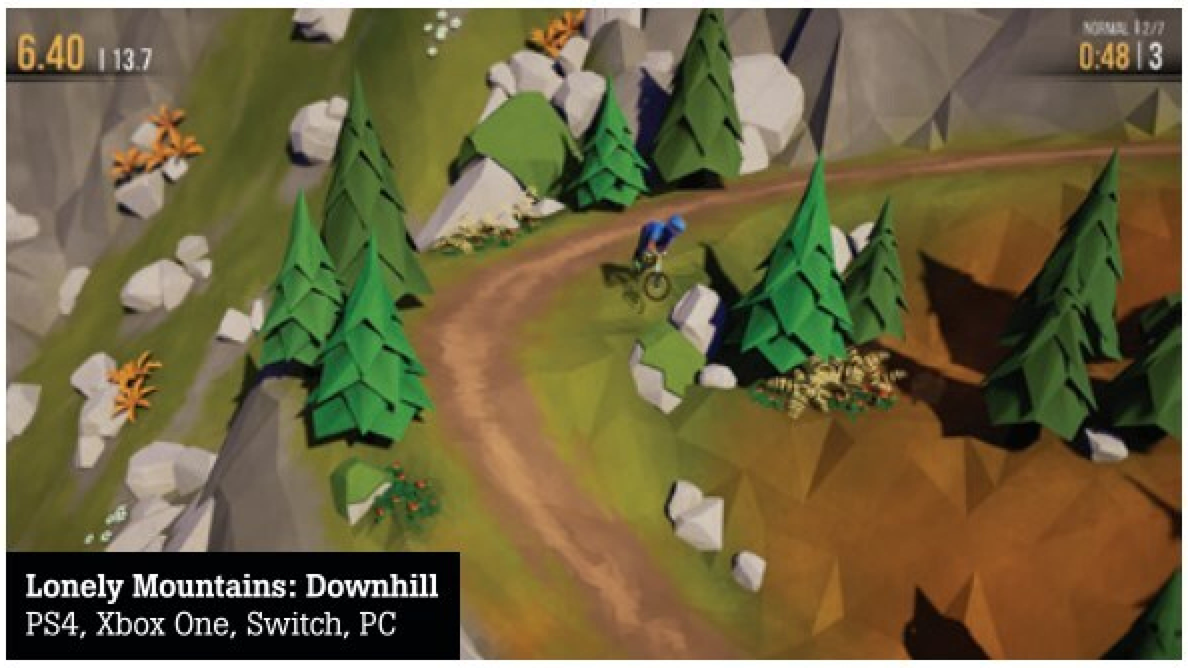
Every mountain has multiple selectable trails to confront, and each of these levels have multiple objectives to attempt, like reaching the base in a certain amount of time, or doing so without crashing. While you can take a leisurely descent along the clearly delineated path, any given course is filled with opportunities for shortcuts and side treks. Can you make that cliff jump? You'll only know if you try. Restarts are near-instantaneous from one of the several checkpoints along the way, so it all becomes about experimentation. Sometimes, just to vent frustration, it can be hilarious to just fling your rider off the mountain and see how far they can drop.

No matter the course, the ambient sounds of wind blowing and bird calls accompany the scratch of tires against gravel, and the sensation is at once relaxing from the environment, and tense from the excitement of the ride – just like a real mountain-biking expedition. Unlock new courses, customize your bike and rider's look, and even acquire new rides that change crucial stats like your suspension and tire trip. Lonely Mountains: Downhill is very high on my personal list of most anticipated games; look for its launch on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC before the end of 2019.

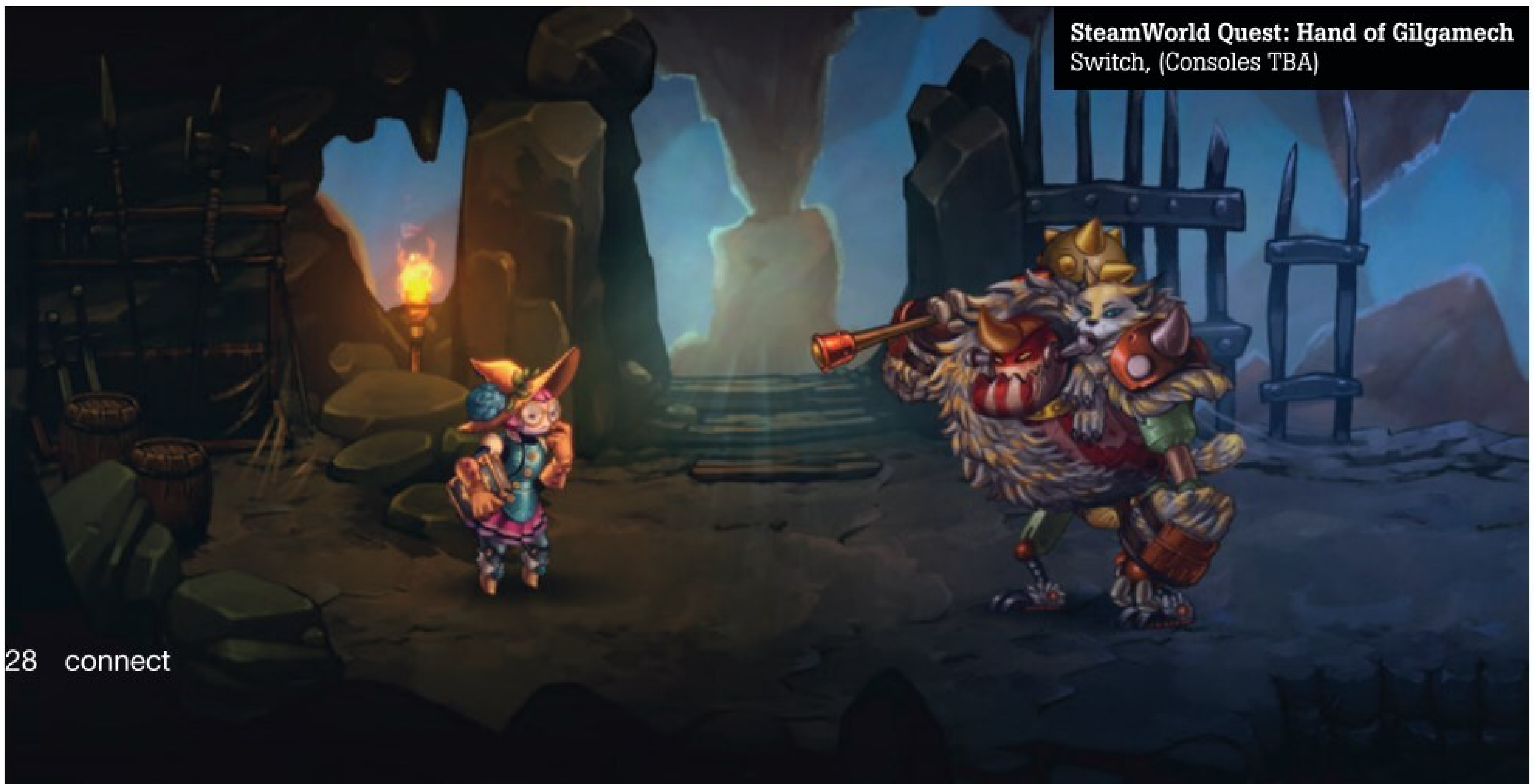
One of Thunderful's other high-profile projects is **SteamWorld Quest: Hand of Gilgamech**. Image & Form Games has repeatedly found success with the different genres of play explored throughout the Steamworld franchise, and this new role-playing game is yet another departure. Players find themselves in what appears to be the distant past of this steampunk setting, featuring adorably designed robots. Guiding a party of steam-powered adventurers (I began the game with a knight and alchemist), the side-scrolling exploration takes players through sylvan medieval environments that have a hand-painted visual look, each filled with hidden chests and enemies to battle.

The meat of gameplay lies in the intriguing battles, which use randomly drawn cards to offer choices of what to do each round. Each card is color-coded to one of your active characters, and options include everything from big smashing attacks to healing abilities. While simple at first, the card-selection system holds a lot of strategic potential. Do you play with the drawn cards or discard a couple and hope for something better from the deck? Play three cards from the same character, and they get a bonus action as a reward. Can you match your elemental attacks to the known weaknesses of your foes? Perhaps you should use minor attacks to build up steam pressure, which in turn fuels a much bigger skill deployment. Even in the early section I played, battles demand attention and careful action selection if you don't want to hit a game over screen. As you learn more and gain new cards, you're obligated to manually rebuild your card deck on a regular basis, and consider what tactics might help in the fights ahead.

SteamWorld Quest embraces its lighthearted tone and colorful presentation, but like the prior SteamWorld games, there's a lot more than meets the eye as you dig into the systems. RPG fans should keep the project on their radar. Image & Form's new game will hit Switch first in 2019, but other unannounced consoles are also on the way. ◆



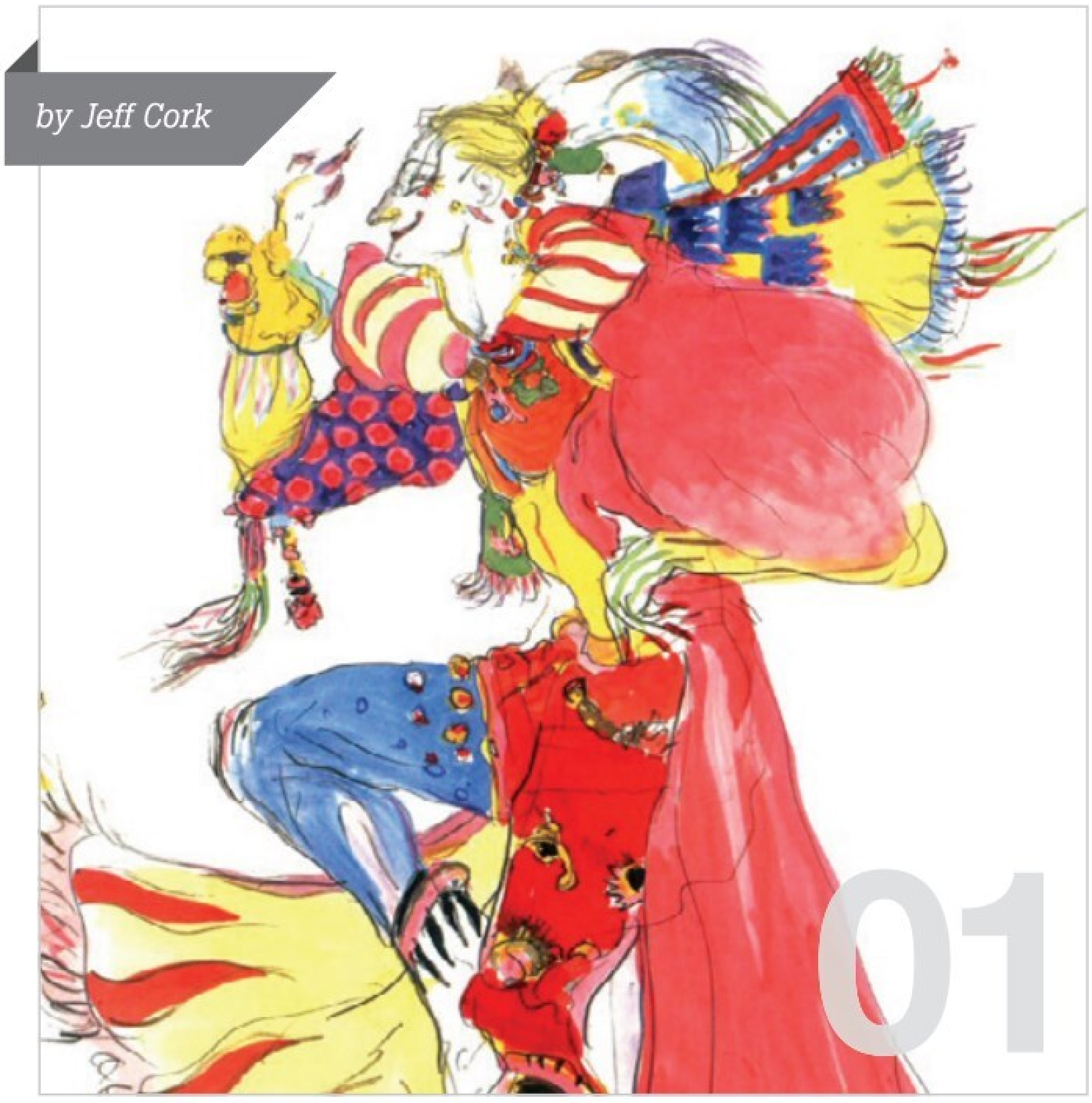
Lonely Mountains: Downhill
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC



SteamWorld Quest: Hand of Gilgamech
Switch, (Consoles TBA)

FOOLS

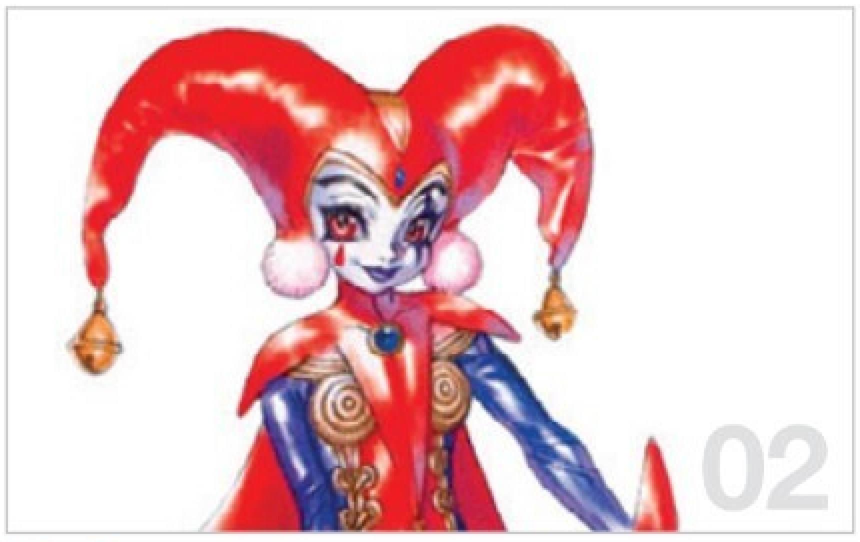
by Jeff Cork



Kefka

Final Fantasy VI

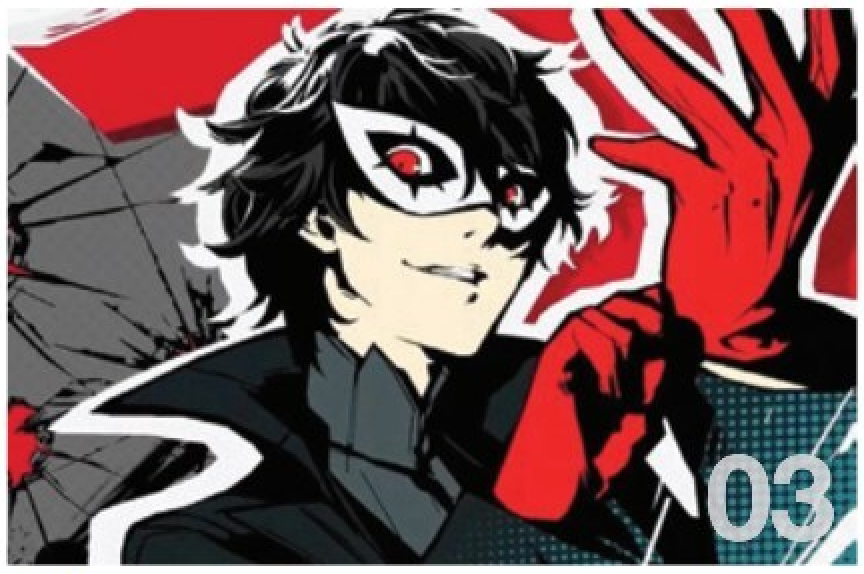
This villain is one of our more colorful entries, in both his choice of dress and memorably evil personality. His "watch the world burn" ethos predated another iconic villain by several decades, though he was more successful than the modern take on the Joker.



Harle

Chrono Cross

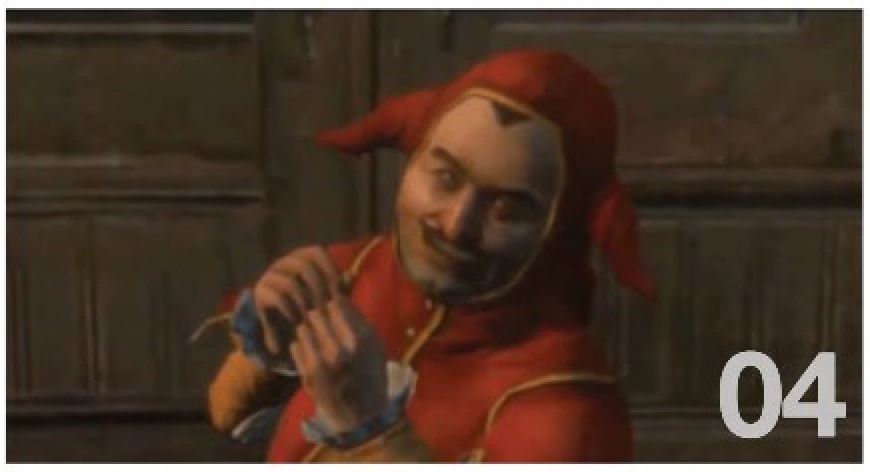
While she is seemingly aligned with the villainous Lynx, this mysterious character is actually loyal to another force. Harle is a powerful ally with a tragic fate…and a hard-to-understand French accent.



Joker

Persona 5

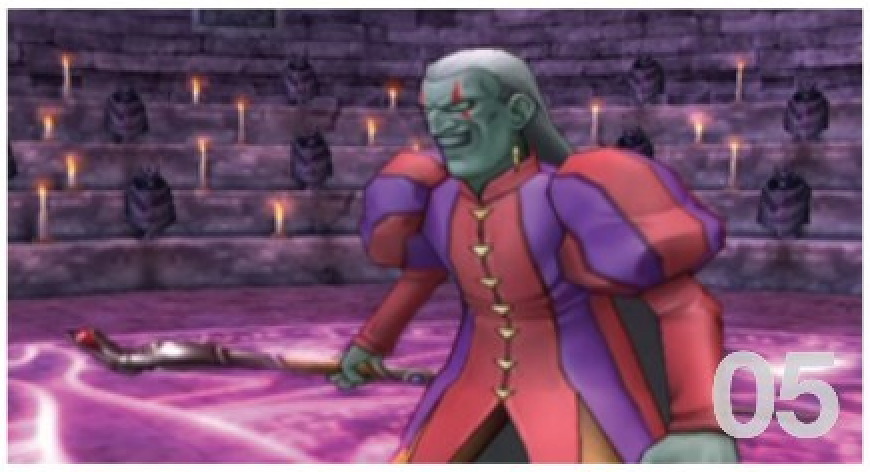
Don't let his mod looks and quiet personality lead you astray; the alter ego of Persona 5's hero is a powerful trickster. Plus, he is the embodiment of the Fool arcana, so his qualifications for this list are beyond question.



Feste

Dragon's Dogma

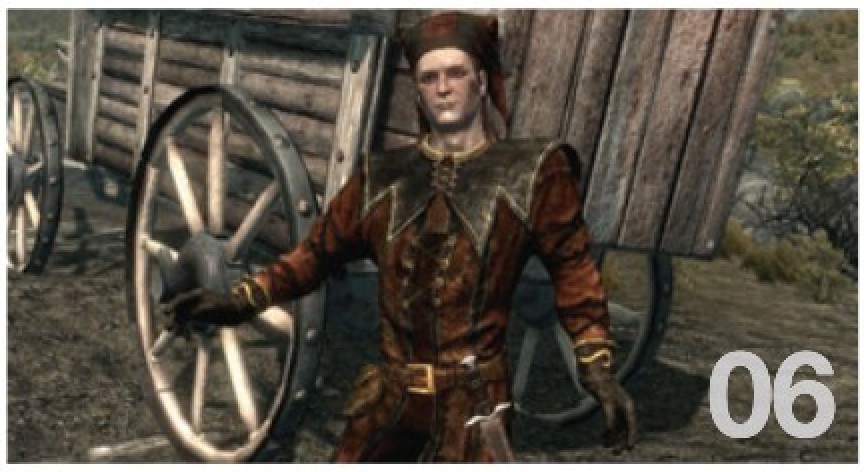
This little creep is a constant presence in Duke Edmun's court, and also pops up in a couple of quests. He attempts to humiliate the Arisen by putting a jester's cap on the character's head, but the joke is ultimately on him.



Dhoulmagus

Dragon Quest VIII

This power-mad goof craved more than laughter. His goal of becoming history's greatest magician landed him in trouble when he stole a powerful scepter. As a reward for his folly, the jester became an unwitting puppet for the game's big bad.



Cicero

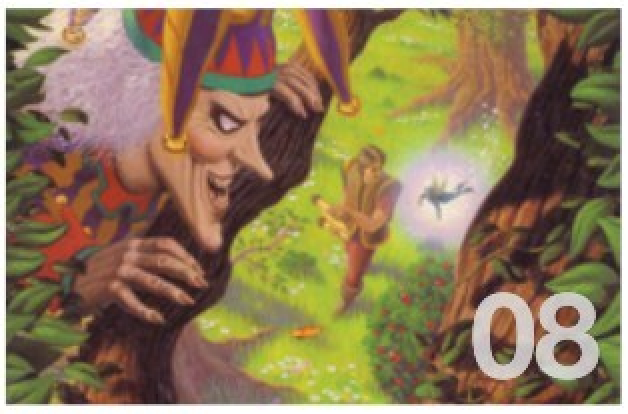
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The Dark Brotherhood is one of Skyrim's most powerful factions, and Cicero is privy to one of its biggest secrets. He is the keeper of the Night Mother's corpse, which is a fairly disturbing responsibility. If you recruit him, he'll often dance for your amusement.

Nights

Nights Into Dreams

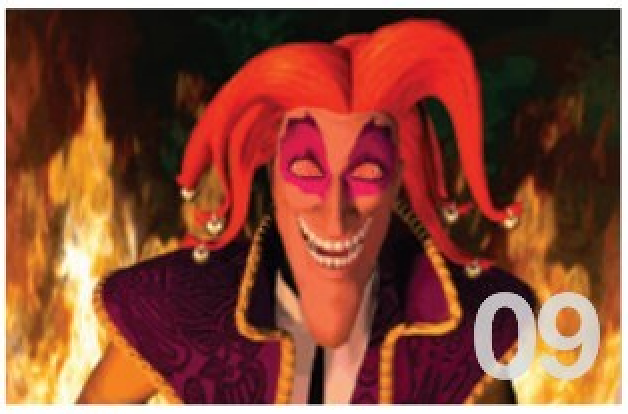
This cheery sprite chases siblings Claris and Elliot through the dream world of Nightopia. He's more interested in saving his realm than providing yuks, though he certainly dresses the part of a complete fool.



Malcolm

Legend of Kyrandia

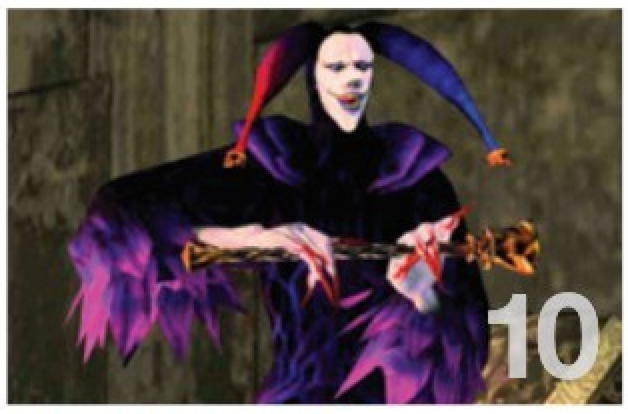
Malcom is a menacing presence throughout the Legend of Kyrandia trilogy, though he undergoes a bit of a redemptive arc at its conclusion. Whether you see him as a villain or misunderstood victim, one thing's not up for debate: The guy's a fool.



Fargus

Pandemonium

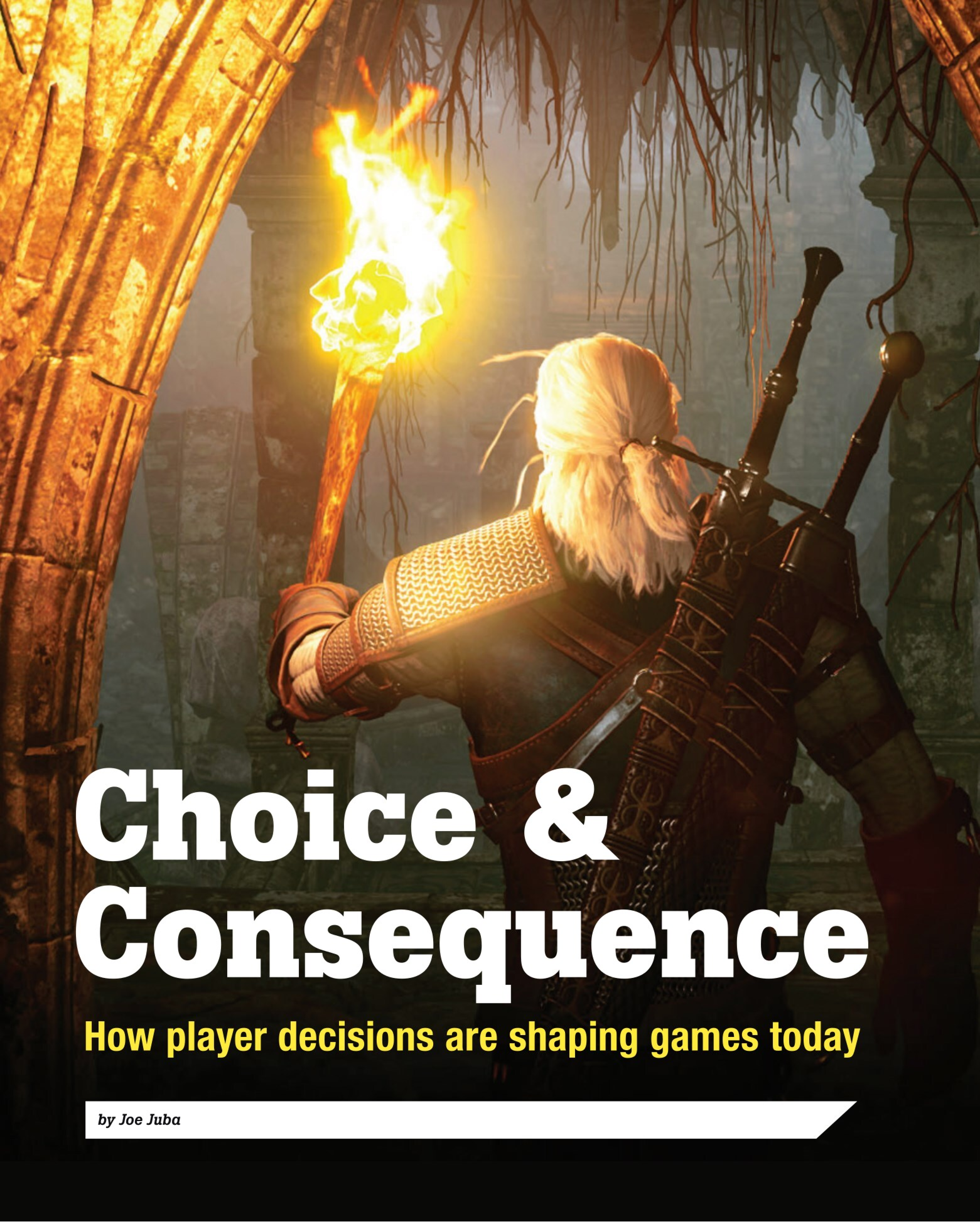
As one of two playable characters in the 2.5D platformer, Fargus gave us a rare chance to walk (and jump) in the pointy-toed shoes of a jester. He was voiced by Whose Line is it Anyway? alum Greg Proops in the first game, adding to his foolish credentials.



Jester Arkham

Devil May Cry III

Arkham doesn't suffer fools lightly, which makes his Jester alter ego all the more disorienting. This odd foe digs into an arsenal of tricks, including teleportation and wall-walking. Vergil isn't amused. ◆



Choice & Consequence

How player decisions are shaping games today

by Joe Juba

Games, books, movies, and television shows are all capable of providing complex characters and compelling tales to draw us into their worlds. However, games stand apart in their ability to give us agency as well as entertainment. As players, we don't just watch stories unfold. We shape them through our actions and our choices, and modern games continue to raise the bar for this kind of participation and immersion.

Creating these experiences involves the intersection of almost every facet of a game's production: story, gameplay, visuals, voice work, and more. So what are the challenges and advantages a studio needs to balance when developing a choice-driven title? To answer that question, we spoke to some of the most knowledgeable developers in the field to get their thoughts on the current landscape.

Branching Paths

Many players judge the quality of a choice by how much it changes the game. Some titles have successfully provided multiple paths with completely different content, but how realistic is that to expect? And how hard is it to pull off?

Szamałek: Sometimes you end up making two different games, or at least two very different versions of the same game. The Witcher 2 is a case in point – depending on their previous choice, players could experience two completely different variants of Act 2, with unique storylines, NPCs, and quests. Making them was a huge effort, but it helped to underscore players' agency. Here, they could feel that their choices really matter. However, we couldn't afford creating such massively different story branches in The Witcher 3, because our hands were more than full with the work needed to develop the huge open world.

Buck: Overall plot branching like we did in Batman: The Enemy Within is always going to be substantially more expensive. And the more branches you have, the more content you have to create … The fifth episode was something we campaigned to do like that for a while. I was very excited about the idea of two separate Jokers; it was something we worked on early on in the season. And we were able to get everyone on board with that idea.

Cage: Many publishers will tell you that if you develop content that only a fraction of the gamers will see, it isn't worth the work and investment. My experience developing these types of games for 20 years shows me that having very different branches is really the heart of these experiences, and that players will reward you for them.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm

Contributors

Emily Grace Buck
Creative director at Buckshot Interactive, former narrative designer at Telltale Games

David Cage
CEO of Quantic Dream and director of Detroit: Become Human

Mark Darrah
Executive producer of Dragon Age and Anthem at BioWare

Chris Floyd
Game director of Life is Strange: Before the Storm at Deck Nine Games

Jakub Szamałek
Principal writer at CD Projekt RED

The second act of The Witcher 2 is drastically different depending on the your choices

Not every choice in The Walking Dead series has a major gameplay effect, but they help us form our own vision of Clementine and her personality

Life is Strange: Before the Storm is a prequel, but players feel invested in Chloe's relationships even knowing what her future holds

Small Is Big

In tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons, players have nearly infinite potential braches to pursue. That isn't possible for a video game, so how do developers deal with the necessity of restricting players?

Floyd: We're never going to be able to simulate what a DM does in a tabletop role-playing session … Yes, it would be great to crack that nut, but I don't know if we'll ever exceed everyone's expectations. The solution we've found is getting players invested in the smaller returns – the things a character might say to you because of something you said earlier. Creating an inside joke that you can come back to. Sometimes that feels just as special to the player, and is very cheap from a production perspective. Reflecting choices in a satisfying way is one way around that without having to take the plot in some radical new direction.

Darrah: There's a bit of a paradox in terms of what people are looking for with choice. Because when you ask people the choices they actually remember from games, it's usually things that are incredibly personal – like the romances I did, or who had to stay behind and die like in Mass Effect 1. Or they are choices that involve immediate payoff, but don't really make that much difference in the end. The Bloody Baron choice in The Witcher 3 is a good example of that; you're advising him to be either gentle or not, and then it pays off within the next couple of minutes. But the choices people think they want are these huge choices that are literally Earth-shaking. In reality, people are our lens into the world … what breeds impact is immediacy and a personal relationship to the people being affected.

Szamałek: In order to tell a coherent story, you need all the different branches to meet at some point – otherwise you'd end up with a collection of disjointed stories, or spread yourself too thinly to tell all the variants of the story in a satisfying manner. One way to do it – and it's something we did to large extent in The Witcher 3 – is to focus on key NPCs and how your choices affect them. So, the story of your character is largely the same in all variants – you go from place A to B, doing X, Y, Z – but the people you encounter meet very different fates depending on your choices.

Your Hardest Choice

Choices in games resonate with players for various reasons, and we all find them memorable or difficult for different reasons. We asked our interviewees which choices were the hardest to make for them as players.

I don't think there is a particular choice which stands out from my gaming history, but I can easily point out the game where making any choice made me sweat: the first installment of the Banner Saga. Playing this game, you learn early on that wrong decisions can have truly disastrous consequences – so you think twice before choosing anything, and yet still screw things up every once in a while. The game does a great job at depicting the hardships faced by your people, and making you feel the burden of responsibility. I enjoyed Banner Saga immensely – and sighed a big sigh of relief when I finished it. *— Jakub Szamałek*

In Wadjet Eye Games' supernatural adventure game Unavowed, there was a choice about what to do with a Greek Muse whose power to inspire had been taken and given to a washed-up artist. She loved being human and didn't want her power back. He was inspiring local creatives to go dangerously far for their art. The resulting choice – Force her to be a muse again? Trust him to learn to be a better muse? Kill him so the power is gone? – was fascinating. *— Chris Floyd*

My honest answer is one that everyone hates, but I'm going to say it anyway. The last choice in Mass Effect 3. Which I, as a narrative designer, have a lot of complex feelings about. Many of which are positive. I sat there with my controller and wept for like five minutes before I decided what I wanted to do … But actually moving the stick to make that happen was so difficult for me, I almost had to turn the game off. *— Emily Grace Buck*

The one that really stands out for me is the third ending in Jade Empire. You can basically side with Master Li and not fight him. It's relatively difficult to do, because the game tries to convince you that this is a terrible decision. You say, "Oh yeah, you're right!" and you die. You just let him kill you. You basically say, "You've convinced me. We need to shut down magic. Magic is dangerous." That one always comes back to me. I really like that kind of ending – "non-standard game overs" our designers would call them – where I'm presented with a choice, and one of them is clearly "and then you die," but I really like things that let me make that choice. *— Mark Darrah*

Jade Empire tries to put a different spin on the classic "good or evil" approach to choice

Black And White

Early innovators in player choice often leaned on a binary system – letting players choose whether they wanted to be good or evil. However, with more nuance available now, does this structure still have a place in modern games?

Cage: I think that good-versus-evil choices are a thing of the past. The reason for this is that people usually try to be nice first, then play evil to see how different the game is, but both choices were artificial. They didn't correspond to the player's real moral values, but rather to a way to play the game. I like when players are confronted with a decision and the answer is not easy.

Szamałek: Paragons of virtue and evil masterminds aren't fun to write and their stories hold little room for surprises. I think that players, too, expect more sophisticated narratives and appreciate games which can deliver them.

Buck: Most players play good. And I mean, 75 to 80 percent of players, if you give them the choice between doing an obviously good and nice thing and an obviously evil thing, they pick the good thing. Even if there's an allure to the evil thing, and even if it's not in their best interest for winning the game, they will still pick the nice thing. When you think about making a game from a production standpoint, putting evil choices in starts to sound really expensive and not worth it, because not many people are going to see them.

Many players found the final choice of Mass Effect 3 disappointing, while others argue the game is more about the journey than any single decision

Paths Not Taken

Not every person is going to replay a game to see the different options and outcomes. Is it a problem that so much effort goes to creating this content people may never see?

Darrah: When you talk to people who play our games many times over, they often make mostly the same choices every time. But that freedom, even not taken, is important. The feeling that you could push this guy off a ledge, even though you would never do it, is important. And just having a little bit of nuance in your playstyle is important. If you feel like you've already made that choice five or fifty hours ago, that really removes the choice from the decision making.

Buck: I think players have pulled back the curtain. A lot of design strategies that we had previously used to make players feel like their choices made a much bigger difference to the plot than they actually did no longer work. It's so easy for them to watch videos of what happened on the other side. It's so easy for them to read walkthrough descriptions to get the exact outcome they want. We now need to be a lot more careful about honoring every choice and making sure that there are differences that the players will feel really good about. Even for players who only play it once, they still want to feel like something really different would have happened if they'd played it a different way. Even if they're never going to pick it up again.

The fifth episode of Batman: The Enemy Within is effectively two separate episodes depending on how you interact with the Joker

Dragon Age: Inquisition gives players choices of varying scale. Some result in different mission text at the war table, while others are matters of life and death

When Bad Things Happen

Choices can have negative consequences. That's just the way life works. But in a game, how can you portray negative consequences without making players feel punished?

Cage: Negative consequences can sometimes be even more exciting than positive consequences. Good choices are often predictable: you succeeded, you got what you expected. But who knows what will happen if you fail? This is a technique I use a lot as a writer, and I usually struggle more to make positive choices as exciting. The bad endings of Heavy Rain or Detroit are some of my favorites: they convey a sense of tragedy, something darker and sometimes more meaningful. What helped me a lot was a decision I made a long time ago to consider failures as a part of the journey instead of a dead end. Even the death of a playable character becomes a strong emotional moment instead of just a frustrating one, and as in real life, even our bad moments are parts of our journey and ultimately of who we are.

Floyd: The worst experience isn't negative consequences – it's not understanding where those consequences come from or not knowing what choice you're really making. Sometimes a story can go wrong when I make what I think is a wise choice, but I have some terrible consequences that I could not have foreseen. Or the game interprets my choice in a way that I wasn't thinking of. That dissonance of expectations is what's really uncomfortable and off-putting for a player – more than just seeing something bad happen and feeling punished.

Szamałek: I think players are ready to accept punishments as long as they are a part of a strong narrative. So, if I decide to kill off one of your favorite NPCs only because you opened door A instead of door B, you'll be annoyed, and with good reasons. But if I'm able to show the believable cause and effect relationship between your choice and the punishment which follows, you'll likely accept it as a part of the story.

Buck: A lot of games will give you choices like "pick which one of these characters is going to survive this scenario." I just want to say, you can do equally good on both sides too. It's just as fun to pick between two awesome things as it is to pick between two awful things.

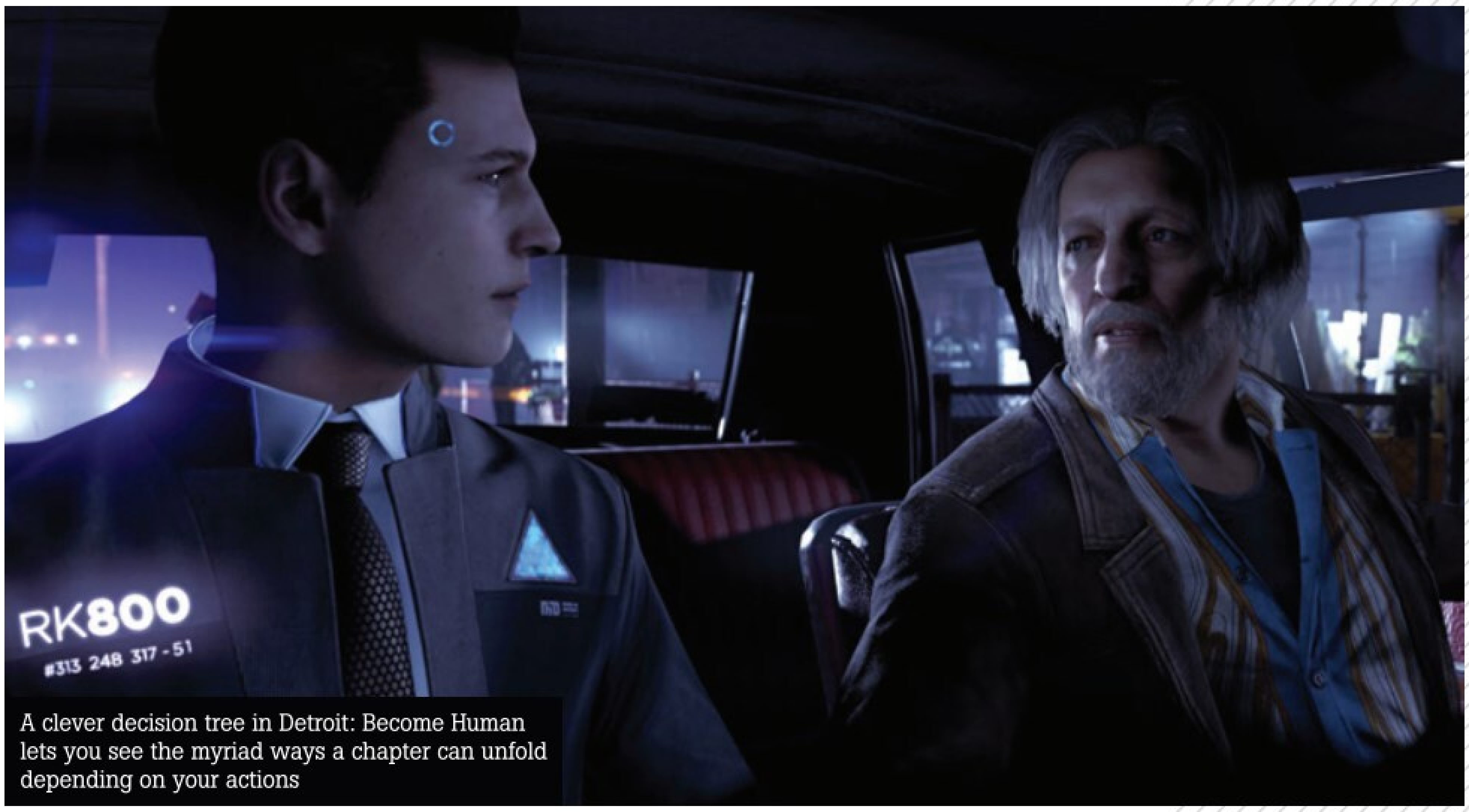
Looking Ahead

Hardware is always improving, which means that new possibilities will open up to developers. What does that mean for player choice, and what areas will see the biggest strides?

Darrah: The biggest thing that we are moving toward that allows to explore the space in an interesting way is moving more stuff into the cloud. Inquisition does it with the Keep, where your choices live in that space, and you can see the branches and the consequences. But it also makes it much easier for these choices to persist into the future. We jumped through a lot of hoops trying to pull your choices between the Dragon Age games. Or between the Mass Effect games. There's some hacky, monstrous stuff in Mass Effect to allow those choices to come forward.

Floyd: We always have to look very closely at the costs of what a particular branch in the story might mean. There are plenty of branches that would be fascinating to go down that we just can't afford to. We can't afford to say "Halfway through Before the Storm, Chloe and Rachel are going to leave Arcadia Bay forever," because we can't produce all those new locations and have the other branch of the story that stays in Arcadia Bay. So, there's a lot of careful calculation that goes into what kinds of branches we can do. If we manage to find ways to make content more efficiently, then theoretically that might be possible.

Cage: The most exciting next evolution will be complex forms of interactive storytelling involving hundreds or even thousands of players. There are some experiences out there exploring this already, but I think we will go much further in the coming years. The next step will probably be procedural writing, where we will put narrative structures and characters' arcs into an algorithm that will generate different stories at each walkthrough based on established narrative rules. It will probably take more than five years to get there, but some form of procedural narrative is probably going to happen at some point. Whether it will create better experiences than human writers remains to be seen. ◈



A clever decision tree in Detroit: Become Human lets you see the myriad ways a chapter can unfold depending on your actions

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fitbit

8-Bit Fit

Rounding up the best health and fitness tools for gamers

by Ben Reeves

1 Fitbit Charge 3 Activity Plus Sleep Tracker

What if your watch acted like it cared about you? Fitbit's newest Charge 3 features all the traditional smartphone notifications and Android-based apps we've come to expect from smartwatches, but it also tracks your heart rate 24/7. The Charge 3's big, backlit touchscreen is ideal for displaying charts that detail your daily activity level and caloric burn. The tracker automatically recognizes when you exercise, records your workouts onto Fitbit's app, and offers gentile reminders to get up and move around when you lose track of time during a weekend gaming binge.

$129 | fitbit.com

2 Hidrate Spark 2.0

Put that energy drink down and ingest something that won't make you feel like a skin sack of garbage. The Spark 2.0 not only looks stylish, it glows to remind you when it's time to hydrate. This BPA free, 24 oz bottle also tracks the amount of water you drink and syncs with a free mobile app that charts your water intake and helps establish good drinking habits.

$45.00 | hidratespark.com

3
WORKOUTS
TRAINING PLAN
GET LOST & RECHARGE
RESPECT THE HUSTLE
KEEP THE SPARK ALIVE
BREATHE IN BREATHE OUT

3 Vi Sense Heart Rate Sensing Headphones and A.I. Trainer

Vi Sense solves a number of workout problems. Not only does it ditch annoying headphone cords that can get caught in weight machines, but thanks to this pair of wireless Harman/Kardon earbuds, Vi's built-in biosensors monitor your heart rate while an A.I. coach guides you toward an ideal intensity. Vi tracks your performance and your goals and then creates a dynamic workout tailored to the kinds of activities you enjoy.

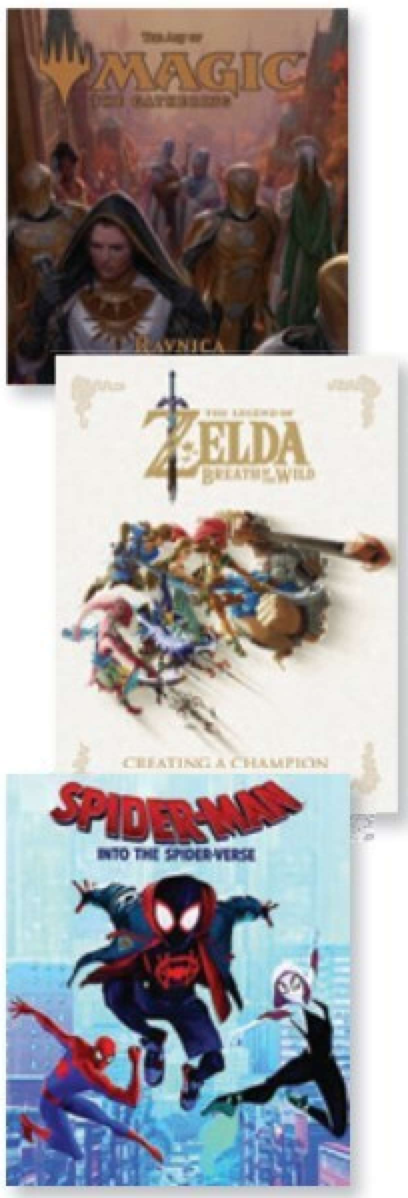
$149 | vitrainer.com

07:00
PHILIPS
4

4 Philips Wake-Up Light Alarm Clock

After hitting the snooze button for the 10th time, you finally shake off the covers and stumble through your morning routine like a zombie. But you don't need to start the day with that most annoying sound in your life. Philips' Wake-Up Light gradually brightens like the morning sun, slowly nudging your body awake naturally. Philips' alarm clock improves your sleep cycle, and studies show that waking up with light can boost your mood, energy levels, and productivity.

$139 | usa.philips.com


The Art of MAGIC The Gathering
RAVNICA
The Legend of ZELDA Breath of the Wild
CREATING A CHAMPION
SPIDER-MAN INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE

THE ART OF MAGIC: THE GATHERING – RAVNICA

Wizards of the Coast's iconic Magic: The Gathering trading card game has taken players to exotic locals for decades, but a 2.5 by 3.5 inch card doesn't do this art justice. The seventh book in VIZ Media's acclaimed series gives players a larger view of the magical land of Ravnica and its inhabitants.

$39.99
viz.com

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD: CREATING A CHAMPION

Few games have inspired us like Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Dark Horses' oversized hardcover features page after page of official illustrations and design concepts complete with behind-the-scenes commentary from the creators.

$39.99
darkhorse.com

SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE

Sony's exploration of the superhero multiverse wasn't just one of the best animated films of the year, it was one of the best films of the year period. After Miles Morales gains spider-like powers, he must team up with a motley crew of lovable Spider-heroes and find his place in the world.

$29.99
intothespiderverse.movie

The Good

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG is the sequel you never knew about but always wanted. Developer Team Cherry was ostensibly working on DLC for the 2017 original. However, in a big surprise, the three developers instead plan to release a full-fledged game complete with a new world, 150 new enemies, and much more. Silksong (Switch, PC, Mac, and Linux for now) does not have a specific release date, but Kickstarter backers of Hollow Knight get it for free.

Quotable

"My question is this: What have you gotten in return? While you're putting in crunch time, your bosses are ringing the opening bell on Wall Street."

AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer **Liz Shuler** urges developers to unionize in an open letter at Kotaku.

The Bad

Developers are refuting claims by Sony Interactive Entertainment worldwide studios chairman Shawn Layden that the company is "open for business" on **CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY** between the PS4 and other systems like the Xbox One and Switch – something the makers of those systems have more openly embraced. Chucklefish founder Finn Brice (Wargroove [shown], Stardew Valley) and Hi-Rez Studios' CEO Stew Chisam (Paladins, Smite) have both said they have the feature ready to go, but have been stymied by Sony so far.

The Ugly

ACTIVISION BLIZZARD bragged about 2018 being the best in the company's history, raking in net revenues of $7.50 billion. However, because this actually fell short of earlier-stated expectations and affected the outlook for the future, the company enacted a restructuring resulting in approximately 800 employees losing their jobs, with CEO Bobby Kotick saying the company "didn't realize [its] full potential." ◆

April2019

GAME RELEASES

Thursday 11
› Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain (PS4)

Tuesday 16
› Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster (Xbox One, Switch)

Tuesday 23
› Mortal Kombat 11 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) ❶

Friday 26
› Days Gone (PS4)

Tuesday 30
› Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age (Xbox One, Switch)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Monday 01
› DC's Legends of Tomorrow (CW)
› Ultraman (Netflix)

Friday 05
› The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (Netflix)
› Shazam! (theaters)

Sunday 07
› Killing Eve (BBC)

Friday 12
› Hellboy (theaters)

Sunday 14
› Game of Thrones (HBO) ❷

Monday 15
› Arrow (CW)

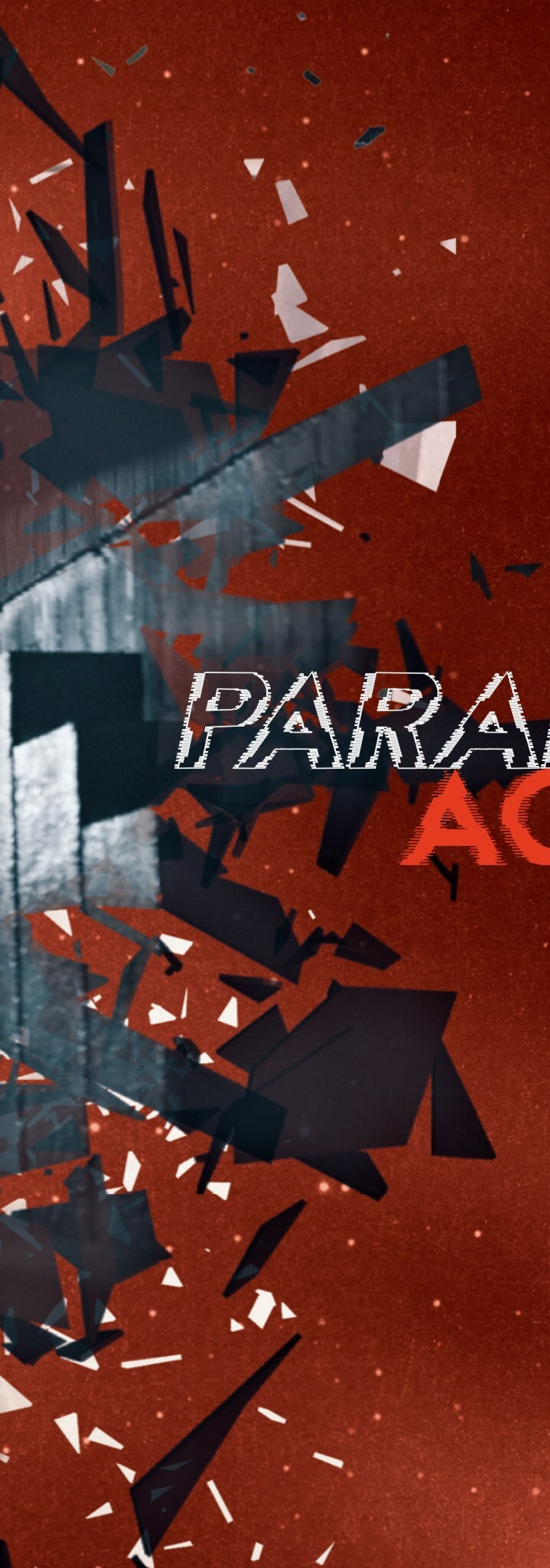
Friday 26
› Avengers: Endgame (theaters)

GAMER CULTURE

Monday 01
Marvel's War of the Realms
If you're curious where Marvel may take the cinematic universe next, the publisher's monthly comics have proven to be a source of inspiration. This month's new War of the Realms series seems like something that would be perfect for the silver screen. As the comic's name implies, all of the universe's realms are in danger, and Midgard is next. The war begins in New York City. This story will also branch into a number of side books to show how the carnage is affecting other heroes and villains.

Friday 12
Midwest Gaming Classic
During this three-day show, over 150,000 square feet of Milwaukee's Wisconsin Center is dedicated to retro and modern games. Most of it is set to free play, including the pinball machines. This is also a great place to shop for games from yesteryear.

Thursday 25
NFL Draft
As the NFL's new rookie class is assigned teams, EA will likely give us our first look at Madden NFL 20. This has been the company's tradition for years. Odds are you'll get your first look at your team's newest recruit in uniform through Madden NFL 20.



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
505 Games

» Developer
Remedy Entertainment

» Release
Summer

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

*Seize and destroy an otherworldly threat in **Control**, Remedy's next supernatural thriller*

by
ELISE FAVIS

BECOMING THE DIRECTOR

In Control, you step into the shoes of Jesse Faden, a woman who has a paranormal gift that brings about strange occurrences she's never fully understood. She's often ridiculed by the rest of society, being labeled "crazy" and pushed away as an outcast. She never feels like she belongs anywhere – that is, until she steps into The Oldest House.

"It's a journey of her finding out who she is and quite interestingly fitting into this strange world, having always been an outsider herself," says narrative designer Brooke Maggs.

The Oldest House is an ever-shifting place where different dimensions collide, looking as if it were pulled straight out of the Christopher Nolan film *Inception*. It serves as the Manhattan-based headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control. The Bureau researches the supernatural, hunting down altered world events (objects with paranormal properties) and containing them for further examination. Appearing as a Brutalist skyscraper from the outside, you'd never guess the mysteries and eventual chaos that takes place inside.

When Jesse enters the building in search of answers about her gift, she finds that it has been overwhelmed by a supernatural threat called The Hiss, which is possessing and killing every person in its path. Lucky for Jesse, she's uniquely capable of controlling and taking it down.

As soon as she picks up the Service Weapon, which occurs early in her journey, Jesse is appointed the new director of the Bureau. Similar to Link's Master Sword, the weapon has chosen her as its new owner. The Service Weapon is as familiar as it is unfamiliar; it's a gun that magically shifts into new forms over time.

Becoming the director was an "unintended consequence," one that Maggs says plays a big role in Control's narrative. "I don't think that she's soldiering on at the beginning thinking, 'This is how I'm going to be the director.' I think that role and what she wants it to mean comes to her over time," she says. "Other people in the Bureau have opinions about what that means, because they've had directors before. [Jesse] is coming in completely fresh and new."

However, because of the destructive paranormal invasion, it's far from an easy job to take on.

"It's almost like becoming emperor right at the fall of Rome," says narrative lead Paul Ehreth. "You might not want the job at that point."

Your Service Weapon shifts into different forms that can be upgraded over time, including Spin (an SMG variant) and Pierce (a high damage gun that penetrates through enemies and objects)

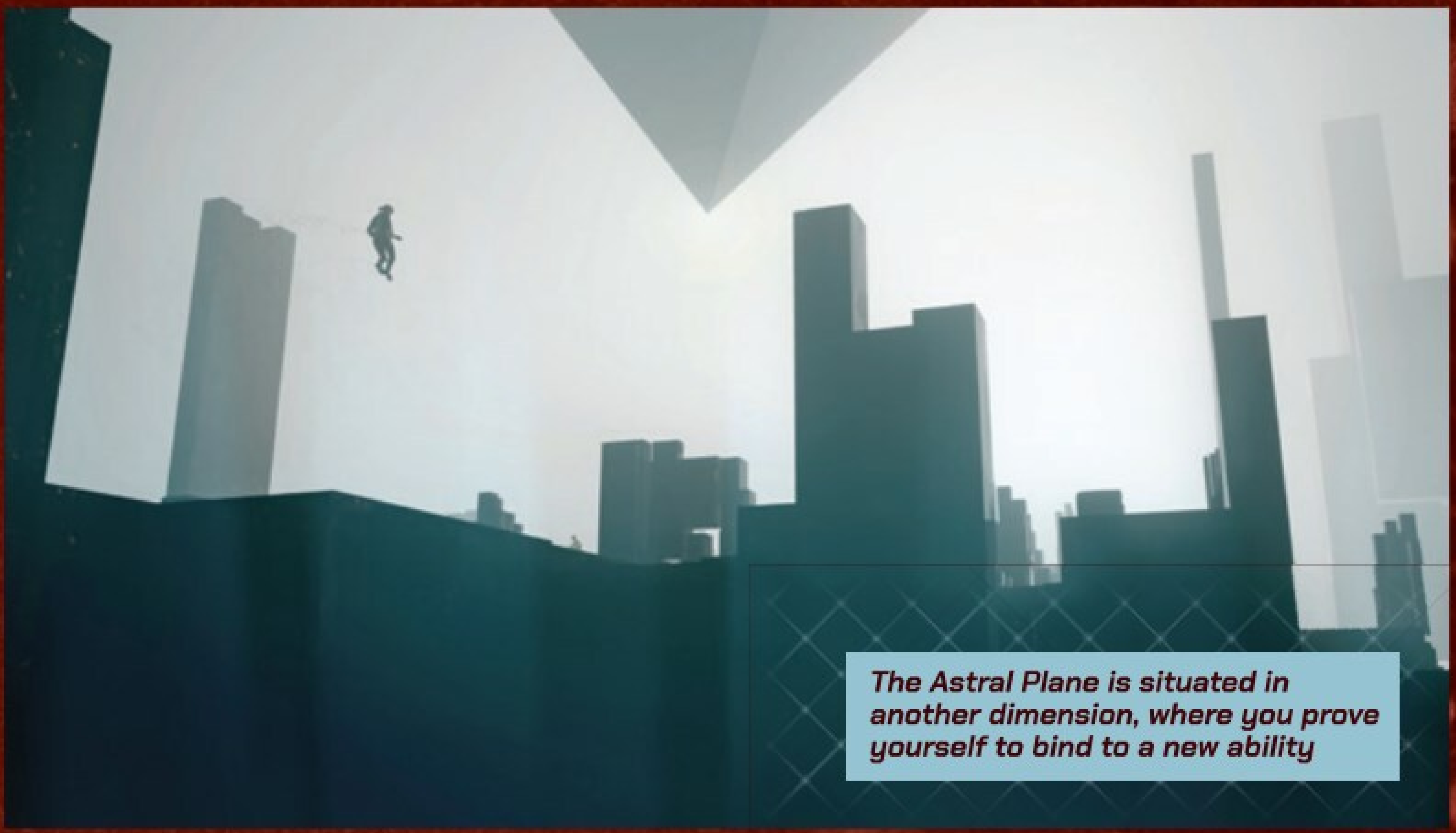
FAMILIAR FACES

Control stars many returning actors and puts them in new roles. Here are some key cast members who have previously worked with Remedy.

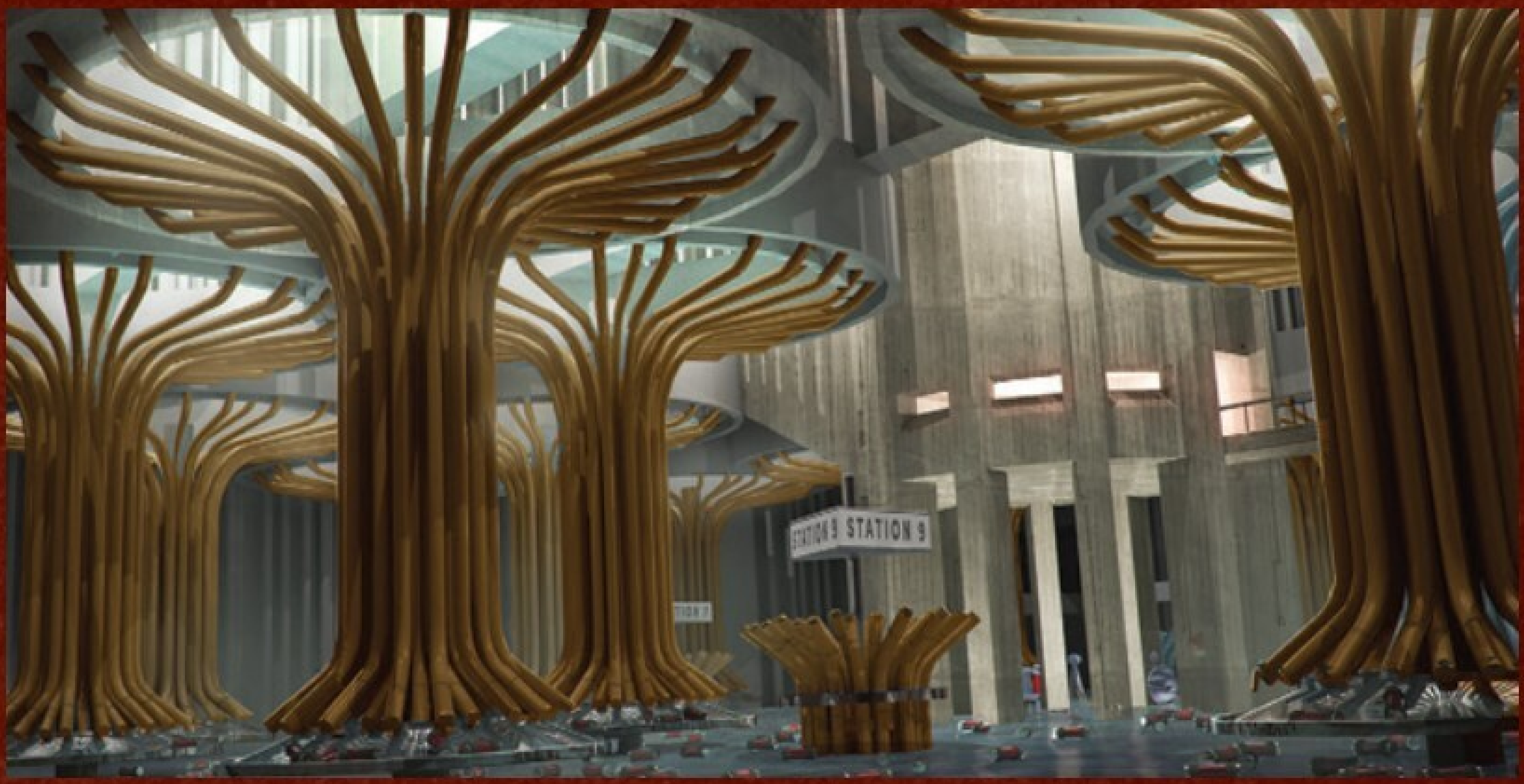
COURTNEY HOPE, who starred as Quantum Break's Beth Wilder, plays heroine Jesse Faden. Jesse is as driven and strong-willed as Beth, as she seeks answers to mysterious circumstances that have happened throughout her life.

JAMES MCCAFFREY, Max Payne's voice actor, comes back as the elusive Zachariah Trench, the Bureau's deceased former director.

MATTHEW PORRETTA, the voice of Alan Wake, now takes the role of Doctor Casper Darling, an eccentric scientist whose videos provide insight into the Bureau's research.



The Astral Plane is situated in another dimension, where you prove yourself to bind to a new ability



FIGHTING A SUPERNATURAL THREAT

During a hands-off demo of Control, we hear a light "ping" as the elevator opens to a new floor. Jesse's heart is pounding. It's clear from her exploration of The Oldest House so far that she can never prepare or expect what awaits beyond those steel doors.

Almost jarringly, the words "Central Research" appear on the screen in all-caps with a bold, white font that has a striking similarity to the horror film *Cabin in the Woods*' title sequence. It almost makes you jump.

Jesse soldiers ahead into an area known to have the Bureau's most top-secret research. A red carpet with a cubic, maze-like pattern flows into the room, and concrete walls are contrasted with vividly colored, large indoor trees that nearly reach the high ceiling. Her current mission is to find head of operations personnel Helen Marshall, who is producing a technology called an HRA, a wearable device that prevents The Hiss' corruption on the user.

"Welcome to the central research area of the Federal Bureau of Control," says a man wearing a Bill Nye-style bow-tie and lab coat, appearing on a collection of small monitors on the wall. This is Doctor Casper Darling, whose decades-old research has helped a handful of recent staff stay alive. "This is where the magic happens."

Corpses of Bureau staff are suspended in midair, levitated by some paranormal force. It isn't long before The Hiss makes itself known, as enemies fly toward Jesse.

Zombie-like creatures possessed by The Hiss zoom into view with grace, as if they were swimming through the air. Jesse fires her Service Weapon, then switches up her tactics with telekinesis, lifting a large slab of concrete that breaks from the floor and launching it at an enemy. Red energy orbs are left behind as the limp bodies disappear, giving Jesse resources that can later be crafted into supplies.

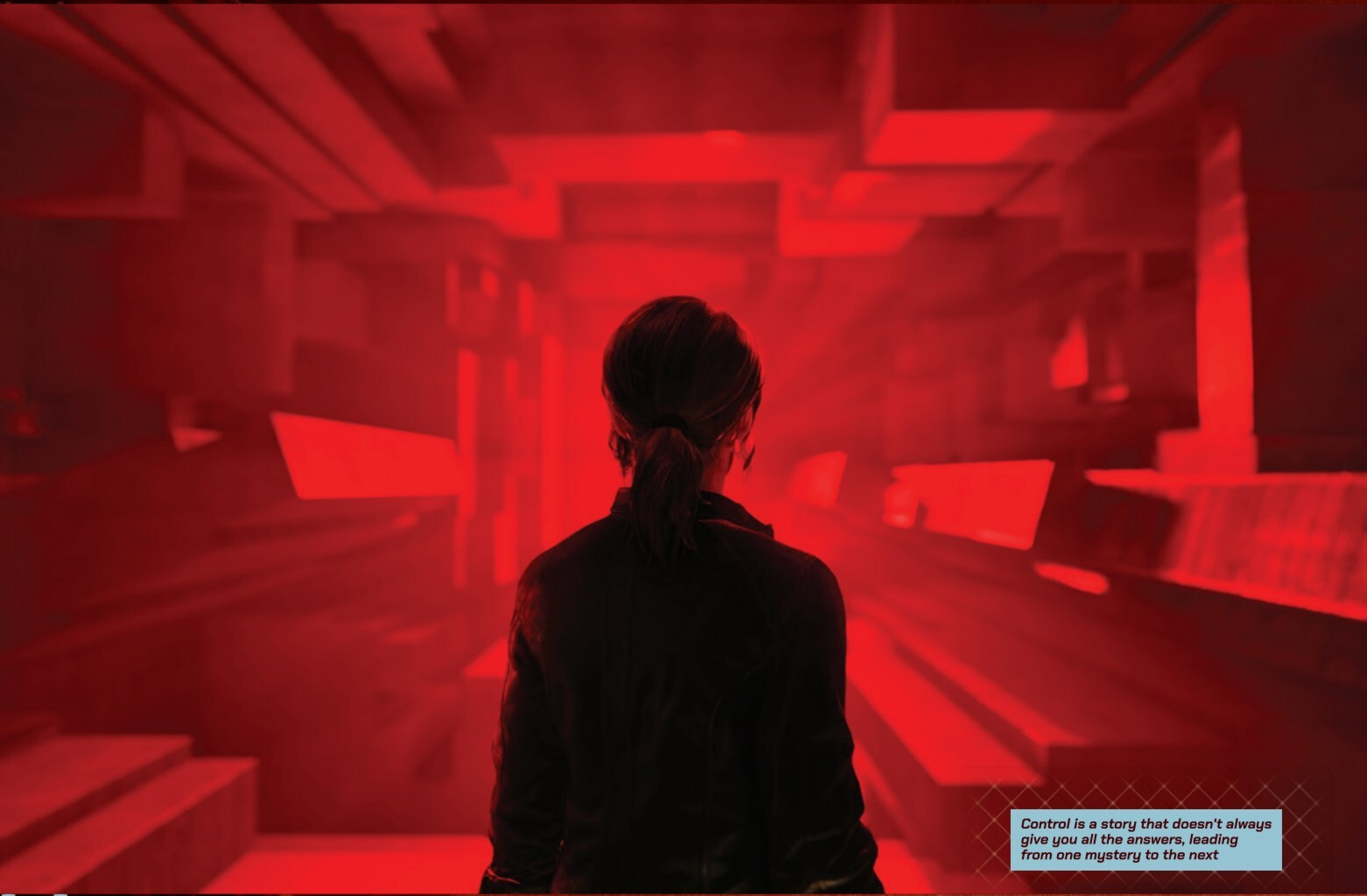
Jesse then encounters human enemies who are restricted to ground combat and wielding rocket launchers, since they are only in the beginning stages of The Hiss' transformation. Jesse levitates and speedily strafes in the air with her evade ability, then stops rockets in midair by simply lifting her hand, signalling to the enemy to launch the projectiles back at them.

It's easy to become entranced by Jesse's quick movements, as she dances in the air avoiding bullets and slams down on the ground, concrete breaking away at her knees. The combat is satisfying and fiery, where you switch between melee, abilities, and gunplay to match the needs of a fight.

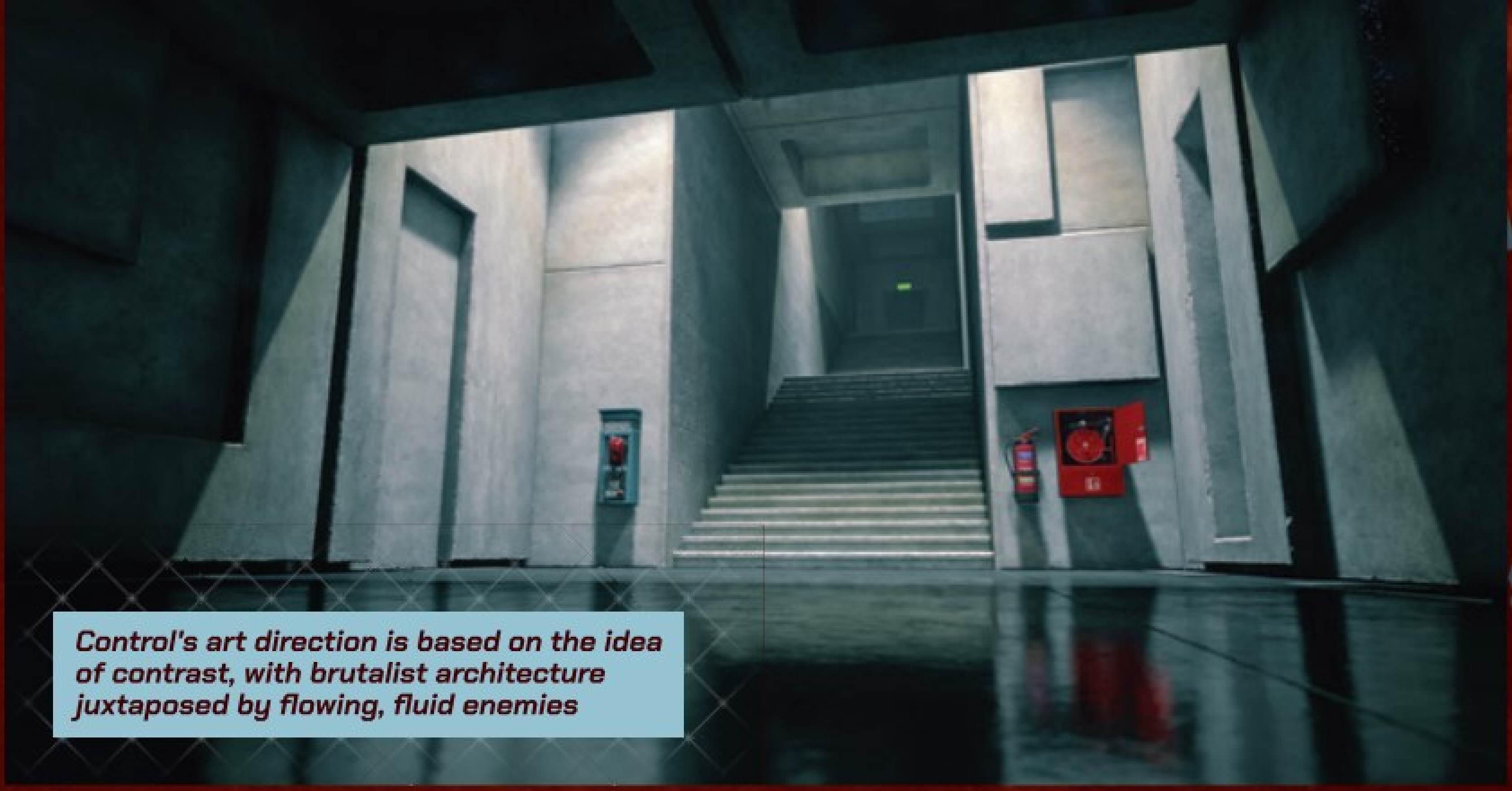
EXPANDING THE STORY

Control is receiving two post-launch expansions, titled AWE (short for altered world events) and The Foundation. Remedy kept details slim, but these are both single-player experiences that expand on the lore of the main campaign. In at least one of them, you are introduced to a new Bureau sector. Between expansions, players can expect free content to drop.

Remedy says these won't ship close to launch, and that the studio plans to take its time and first focus on making Control the "best it can be."



Control is a story that doesn't always give you all the answers, leading from one mystery to the next



Control's art direction is based on the idea of contrast, with brutalist architecture juxtaposed by flowing, fluid enemies

Moving on, Jesse notices her path is blocked by The Hiss' corruption. A door to the next sector is barely visible, with glowing red cubes shielding its exterior. She shoots at several cubes scattered around the lobby, weakening The Hiss' hold, and finally eradicates it completely so she can be let through.

Jesse continues to make her way through a number of enemy-filled rooms. Jesse launches unused desks and couches at enemies, while taking cover behind structures like big machinery, which she crouches behind automatically. Each area in Control is built with a dynamic environment that lets you be creative with physics – you can pick up almost anything, from an extinguisher hooked on the wall to a camera's tripod.

"The environment itself is very dynamic and destructible, and we use the environment as a weapon against enemies," game director Mikael Kasurinen says.

Nearing the end of the demo, Jesse finds an Object of Power, which are items altered by supernatural forces, leaving them with paranormal properties. These come in many forms; this time, it appears as a decades-old machine in an isolation chamber, with X-ray images on its monitor.

As soon as she interacts with it, Jesse is transported to the Astral Plane, an otherworldly place in another dimension reminiscent of Batman: Arkham Asylum's Scarecrow dream segments. The Astral Plane is most often used as a tutorial segment (and sometimes for boss fights), where Jesse must prove herself before binding to a new ability. This time, she fights translucent enemies who wield pistols and look vaguely human. If she beats them, she learns Seize, a new mind power that possesses weakened enemies to work alongside her.

Once the Astral Plane segment is complete, Jesse returns to the same room inside the Bureau. Now that she has a new ability, combat is enhanced to reflect it. When she lowers an enemy's health enough, she takes their free will away and they become slaves to her fighting needs.

This becomes all the more complicated, though, when Hiss Clusters show up. These large, glowing red spheres roll around the room and heal enemies, making them difficult to defeat. You can kill the cluster by beating it down with abilities and bullets, or you can weaken it enough to capture it with Seize. When under Jesse's control, the cluster no longer heals enemies and they become more vulnerable.

"When you start to face different combinations of enemies, that's when the true challenge comes," Kasurinen says.

WEAPON FORMS

As you progress through Control, you periodically gain new forms for your Service Weapon, a shifting gun that appears like a pistol. Forms mimic specific gun types like shotguns and change firing patterns. You can equip two at a time in your loadout and switch between them in combat with the press of a button. Further customization is possible with mods, such as reload speed and a clip increase. Finding mods requires you to explore the depths of the Bureau, since they appear as physical objects in the world. Jesse has unlockable character perks too, like increasing her health or shortening cooldowns. You have unlimited ammo but can only fire the weapon so much before initiating a cooldown. This period of time varies between weapon forms. Here is a look at the forms Remedy has confirmed so far.

GRIP

This is the most basic form of the Service Weapon and is similar to a standard pistol.

PIERCE

One of the most powerful forms, Pierce can shoot through cover and even through multiple enemies with one bullet.

SPIN

Like an SMG, Spin deals a lot of damage in quick succession. It's best used against large groups of enemies.

SHATTER

With this form, you can trigger a devastating explosive blast, but it has a long cooldown period.

CHARGE

Similar to Shatter, Charge creates an explosive blast, but it has a wider area of effect when you charge it up.

HANDS-ON WITH CONTROL

While playing a demo, we explore two areas, the research lobby and the black rock quarry. The research lobby is the same beginning area during the hands-off demo where Jesse searches for Helen Marshall. The latter is a dig site, with tall stone slabs resembling skyscrapers and a starry night sky above, where the Bureau mines for a valuable resource known as black rock. In each space, we had a chance to try Control's combat and explore as we saw fit.

Combat in Control is the most dynamic and satisfying I've seen from Remedy. Buttons are mapped intuitively, in a way that feels comfortable and natural. For example, while levitating, you can satisfyingly ground-pound onto enemies by looking down and clicking the right stick. If you don't like the layout, you can remap the controls to better fit your play style.

With a shifting weapon at your disposal, you can swap between two different equipped modes whenever you wish. This proves entertaining and visceral, allowing you to quickly change tactics when necessary. When you're stuck in the crossfire, you can lift objects around you such as pieces of the floor that gravitate toward you like a magnet, creating a makeshift shield.

Levitation brings more velocity to fighting, allowing you to shift through the air quickly with evade as bullets and rockets are fired your way. It also lets you explore hidden areas that were previously inaccessible. These secret spaces can be significant to the lore with audio logs and files. Sometimes minimal platforming is required, too, as you combine levitation and evade to reach distant ledges. You can only levitate so high, so finding hidden areas up top (and there are many, we're told) requires skill.

Levitating also softens your fall, so you can explore areas far below without taking fall damage. For example, I dropped down a narrow opening and levitated at the last moment so that I could safely land in an eerie basement with spores and fungus growing on the walls, reminding me of The Last of Us. A lift was near me, but it was broken. To get back up, I solved a small but engaging puzzle that required me to search for cubed generators to attach to a mechanism on the wall.

Returning to the main floor, more enemies spawned. I quickly learned some are weaker to bullets, while others are fragile when up against certain powers, so it's important to tactically choose your load out. If you aren't happy with the load out you chose, it can be switched on the fly, bringing more flexibility to how you approach fights.

SIDE ATTRACTIONS

Control's side missions take time to expand on the world's lore and the strange happenings inside The Oldest House. For example, one we saw was about a Bureau agent sitting in front of a fridge, unable to look away or move without being killed. He's sitting there, waiting for his replacement that never comes.

"Side missions are about learning more about the world, acquiring more abilities, and meeting other people, as well as other types of entities that you don't actually even see in the campaign," says game director Mikael Kasurinen.

Control will have plenty of side content, as well as items, characters, and enemies that aren't found in the main campaign. Additional Objects of Power which grant you a new ability if you succeed at binding to it in the Astral Plane, can be also be found in these. Certain boss fights, including one we saw that appears as a giant tentacle monster with a large eye that shoots circular bullets out of its pupil, are exclusive to these missions as well.

The black rock quarry, where the Bureau mines for valuable materials, is an area we got to explore during our hands-on demo

BEEFING UP COMBAT

Given the dynamic 3D spaces of Control's combat, Remedy had to rebuild its A.I. from the ground up, bringing sophistication to how foes behave in the wave-based combat. A new technology built specifically for Control called the Encounter Director procedurally generates enemy encounters that are tailored to the player's progression and location. This allows for the right pacing with the number of enemies spawned and varies its type depending on which Bureau sector you're in.

"We have basically a sandbox environment, and looking at previous games, they were more linear," Kasurinen says. "They were more static, more predefined. We scripted every single enemy where they appeared and how and so on. In this game it's all procedural: the enemies are spawned by a system and all of these things can support this world that is open-ended."

Progression is similarly non-linear, giving the player agency in how they want to upgrade abilities. Remedy says it's influenced by the "Metroidvania" formula. For example, upgrading your Service Weapon requires you to find new weapon forms and mods in the world. Your abilities are also tied to Objects of Power you discover. If you choose to bind with them after proving yourself in the Astral Plane, they can change up combat and exploration dramatically.

Weapon forms bring an added depth to gunplay, such as changing the firing rate and form completely. For example, the gun can mold from a pistol to a shotgun variant. One of the most impressive forms we tested out was Pierce, which has a slow firing rate but is so powerful it shoots right through cover. Bullets can pierce through enemies, too. If you line up foes at a certain angle, you can take them all down in one shot so they fall like dominoes.

"Each weapon has additional mods that you can add that makes them more complicated, and each weapon also grows in power as you upgrade them," Kasurinen says.

A NARRATIVE WONDERLAND

Experimenting with storytelling is something Remedy has dabbled with as far back as 2001's Max Payne, which astounded players with its noir narrative, told both through a graphic novel format and thoughtful monologue. With Alan Wake and Quantum Break, Remedy pushed the boundaries even further, bringing live-action components and ambitiously intertwining television sequences.

Although storytelling ambitions are still present in Control, creative director Sam Lake says the team took "reasonable steps back" with how the narrative is tackled, by focusing on world-building first and scriptwriting second. The team recognizes that Quantum Break's narrative objects scattered around the world were dense and are hoping to tackle these in a more concise fashion.

"We're definitely planning to have audio logs and documents to read through," Maggs says. "We are aware that in Quantum Break we had a lot to read. I think we'll definitely be cutting back, being more strategic about what those documents will be and how they will add to the mysteries as well."

There are plenty of mysteries in Control. Where did Jesse's supernatural powers come from? Why are other dimensions seeping into The Oldest House, and what brought about The Hiss? Remedy is building mystery upon mystery with Control, where answers to burning questions may only be partially answered.

"There may be things in the narrative that are unclear to players but there is a very specific reason it was done by us behind the scenes, so it's always kind of up to players to learn why something is the way it is," Ehreth says.

Everything you see and experience in Control is questionable, and on some level unexplainable. Remedy anticipates players will come up with theories of their own, so they become active participants in the thought-provoking story.

"I personally like mysteries," Lake says. "I like not having all the answers given to me, because that's an active state and you are thinking about it and joining in."

Remedy is always interested in bringing clever twists to storytelling, and its dedication to transmedia continues in Control. Live-action sequences, featuring the aforementioned Doctor Casper Darling, appear to the player through fuzzy monitors in the Bureau. Even Zachariah Trench, the former director who has mysteriously been killed, shows himself to Jesse through ghostly apparitions that appear like silhouetted projections on walls and in shadows.

"We are actually using a combination of in-engine elements and live-action material, so those silhouettes of him appearing, those are shot in live-action," Lake says. "But then we are putting that in weird layers into the game engine, so it feels strange."

Having those moments feel off-putting or bizarre are part of what makes Control so intriguing, bringing only so much light to the strange circumstances in the Bureau and letting us piece together the rest. Maggs likens The Oldest House to a "narrative wonderland," and it's easy to see why.

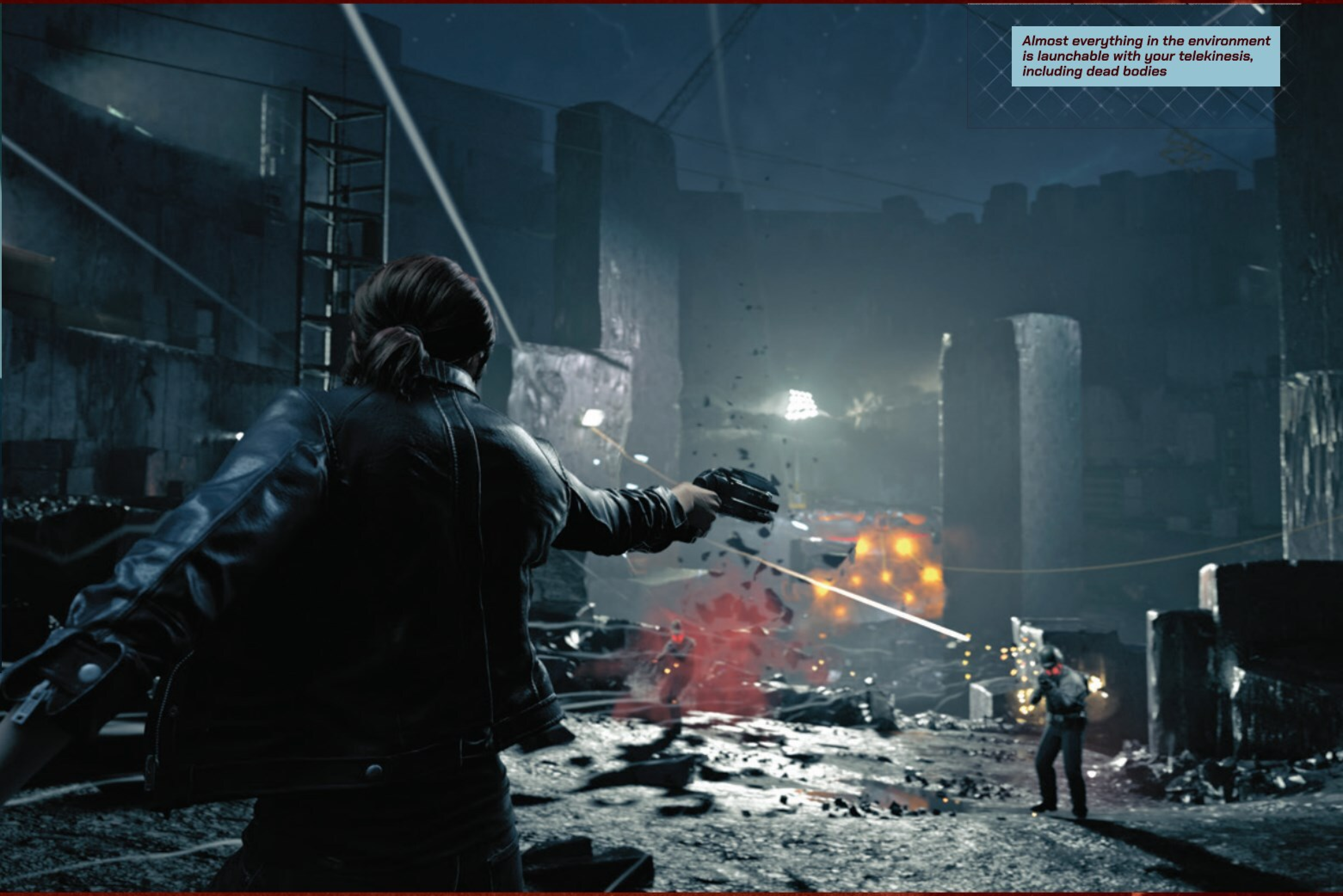
CONTINUING ALAN WAKE

Over the years, Remedy's thriller Alan Wake has developed a cult following. Remedy would still love to create a sequel, with creative director Sam Lake expressing that there are "many stories to be told in that world," but the studio is not currently working on a follow-up.

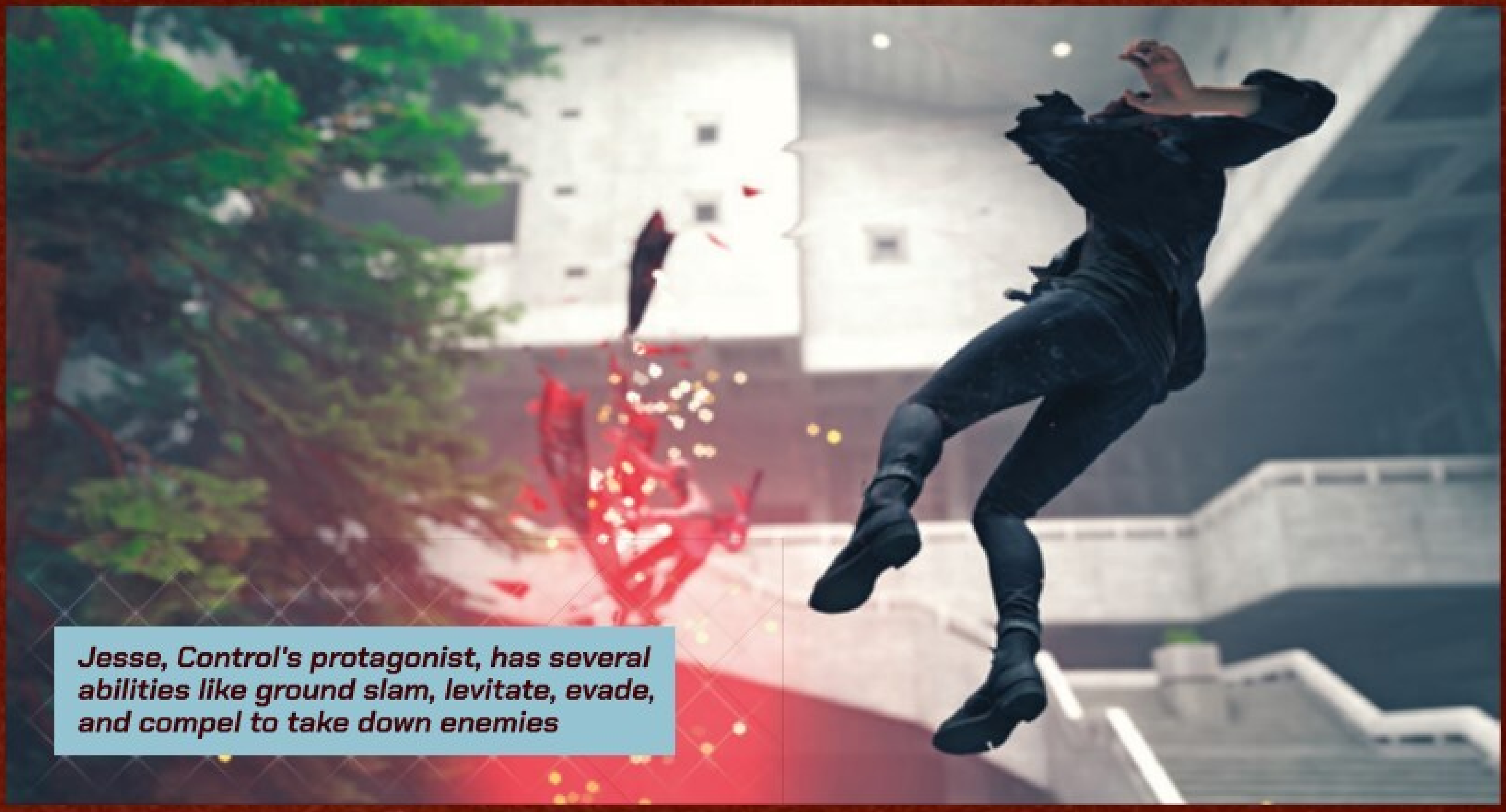
"Like I've said many, many times, in no way have we abandoned Alan Wake into the dark place," Lake says. "It's a complicated thing of figuring out the right concept and the right partners and everything clicking together and getting the project up and running in that sense. We definitely want to try and make it happen."

Although a full-fledged sequel isn't in the works, Remedy announced an Alan Wake television series with Contradiction Films late last year. Lake is heading the project as executive producer along with *Legion*'s Peter Calloway, who is serving as both the showrunner and writer. Lake says the show's production is still in its "early stages."

"We are using the story of the game as a starting point and foundation for what we are building, but we want to also bring in new elements and expand on that and create an interesting world that, as you would always hope, could go on in a TV series for multiple seasons," Lake says.



Almost everything in the environment is launchable with your telekinesis, including dead bodies



Jesse, Control's protagonist, has several abilities like ground slam, levitate, evade, and compel to take down enemies

TAKING BACK CONTROL

Remedy has a reputable history with action games that lead with a strong central character and an engaging story, and this continues with Control. However, the game also symbolizes a shift and a change.

Control is Remedy's first step in a larger plan of redefining the studio. Since 2016, the company has transitioned toward becoming a multi-project studio and aims to release titles on a more regular schedule. Aside from Control, Remedy has two other projects in the works. Smilegate hired the studio to develop the single-player campaign for the sequel to the first-person shooter CrossFire, which is wildly popular in Asia. Remedy also has a smaller in-house group called Vanguard exploring online multiplayer opportunities.

With a new publisher and a heroine in search of difficult-to-find answers, Control reflects both the studio's and Jesse's plight to regain control of their destinies. Only time will tell if both reach the heights they ambitiously aim toward. ◆

Learn more about Control at gameinformer.com/control, where you can find exclusive interviews, features, videos, and more throughout the month

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
10-Player Online Shooter

» Publisher
TBD

» Developer
Blind Squirrel Games

» Release
2019

HERO LOOTERS

A promising new studio slides into the spotlight with new looter shooter, Drifters

BY BEN REEVES

Blind Squirrel isn't a household name, but the studio has quietly worked with a number of big franchises for years. Founded in 2010, the developer has partnered with big-name publishers like 2K Games and EA to release ports for games like XCOM 2, The Sims 4, and the BioShock collection. Now, after nearly a decade grinding on other studios' properties, Blind Squirrel is striking out on its own with an internally developed project called Drifters. The team might be small, but its ambitions are big; Drifters is a multiplayer shooter that blends the hero-based tactics of Overwatch with the party-like antics of Super Smash Bros., and it hopes to be one of the breakout gems of the year.

Drifters revolves around the adventures of a group of intergalactic raiders who live on the outskirts of society and earn a living by scavenging dilapidated warships for supplies and rare artifacts. These privateers use jetpacks and grappling hooks to navigate the chaotic gravity fields of deep-space junkyards, so they are known by their colloquial nickname, drifters.

"We think of them as a ragtag team of raiders," says creative director Haydn Dalton, whose previous projects include Darksiders and Darksiders II. "When they go out, they fly these hot rod-esque dropships, and they meet up at this bar called the Exiles Return, which is where they get their missions. Think like the mercenary bar from Deadpool. They'll go there to get their missions, and when it's all over, they come back to clock out. They might be mortal enemies on the battlefield, but, at the end of the day, they walk away and they're like, 'See you later, Fred.'"

SPACE PLUNDER

Drifters' story is simply a thin set dressing for the meat of the game, which is a series of 5v5 team battles. At launch, Blind Squirrel hopes Drifters features eight different characters with diverse abilities (see Meet The Motley Crew sidebar), three multiplayer maps, and five different modes, including variations on king of the hill, deathmatch, and capture the flag.

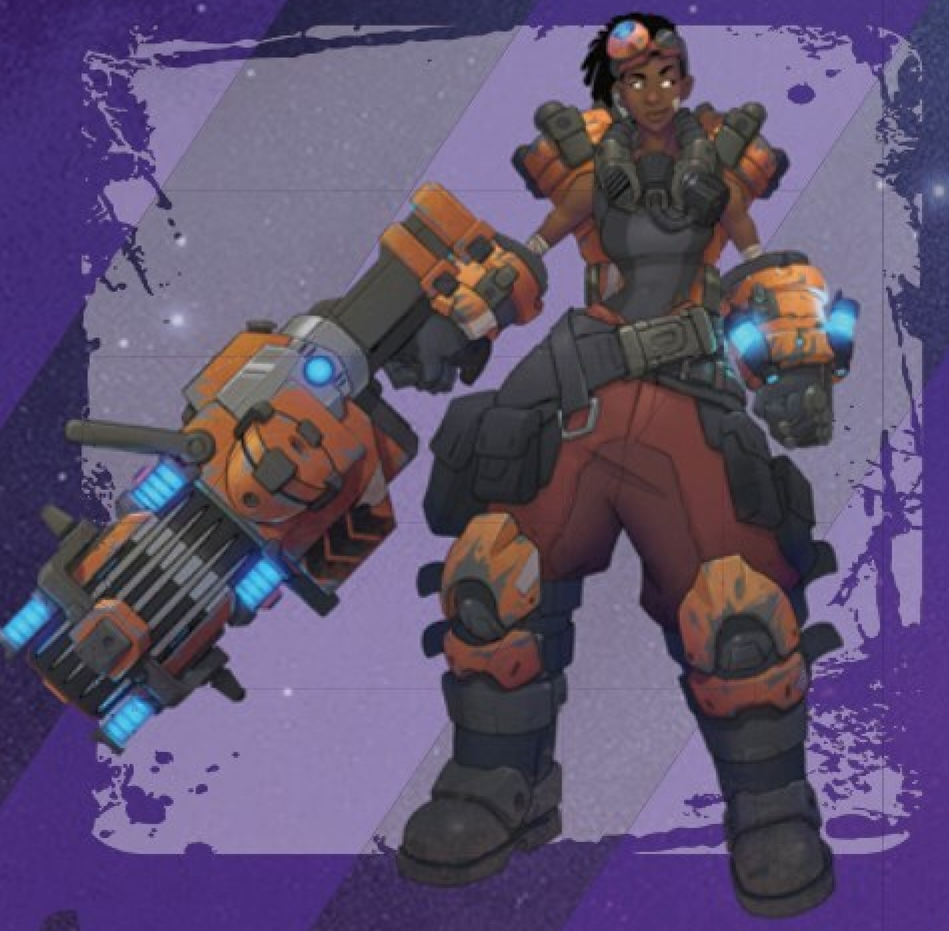
During our demo, we caught an early look at a mode called Plunder, in which teams battle across the outer hull of a derelict starship in a race to collect the most loot. Various goodies are scattered inside assorted chests and other breakable objects. The loot collected by each team is pooled and converted to soft currency at the end of a game, so the more loot players grab, the bigger their take at the end of the session. Naturally, this currency allows players to unlock new tech-tree items, as well as cosmetics for their heroes.

In addition to minor loot, starships contain a few rare artifacts, but these relics must be extracted via a dropship. As soon as a player picks up an artifact, other players can see them highlighted on a minimap, turning them into high-value targets. However, when a team successfully brings an artifact to an extraction point and defends it long enough for their dropship to arrive, the entire team splits the pot five ways.

Artifacts contain more than loot. These prized finds are actually filled with smaller capsules that contain rare weapons and valuable gear. These capsules can also be purchased using real-world money, but Blind Squirrel says every item in the game can be earned through playing.

"There will be some vanity stuff in there, but we're actually going to focus on a tech-tree-style upgrade system, so you can invest in the way each character's guns work," Dalton says. "For example, you can change what type of shotgun your character carries. Guns will all ultimately do the same amount of damage, but they deal it out in different ways, which might fit your play style. So, some shotguns might blast wider but not as far, and some might do a little less damage but fire faster."

MEET THE MOTLEY CREW: A CLOSER LOOK AT DRIFTERS' HEROES

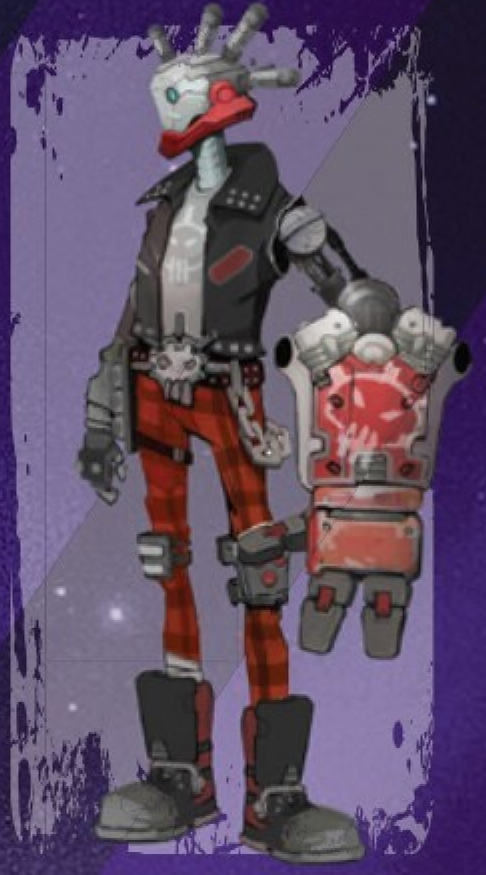


RESISTOR

Resistor is a punk-rock robot who loves to create chaos on the battlefield. His scattergun fires wildly, but he can also tag enemies and then switch over to a bazooka that homes in on those targets. Resistor also has the ability to corrupt health pickups and chests across the battlefield. When other characters grab his corrupted items, they spawn a digital ghost that attacks the unsuspecting foes.

PRIMARY WEAPON » **Gyrojet Rifle** – a fast-firing weapon that launches a self-propelled ordinance. These bullets increase in damage over distance and embed a nano tracker on their target. These trackers send a homing signal back to Resistor's rocket launcher.

ULTIMATE ABILITY » Resistor tosses the massive rocket on his back at enemies, but he can also steer the missile to a specific point across the level before it detonates.

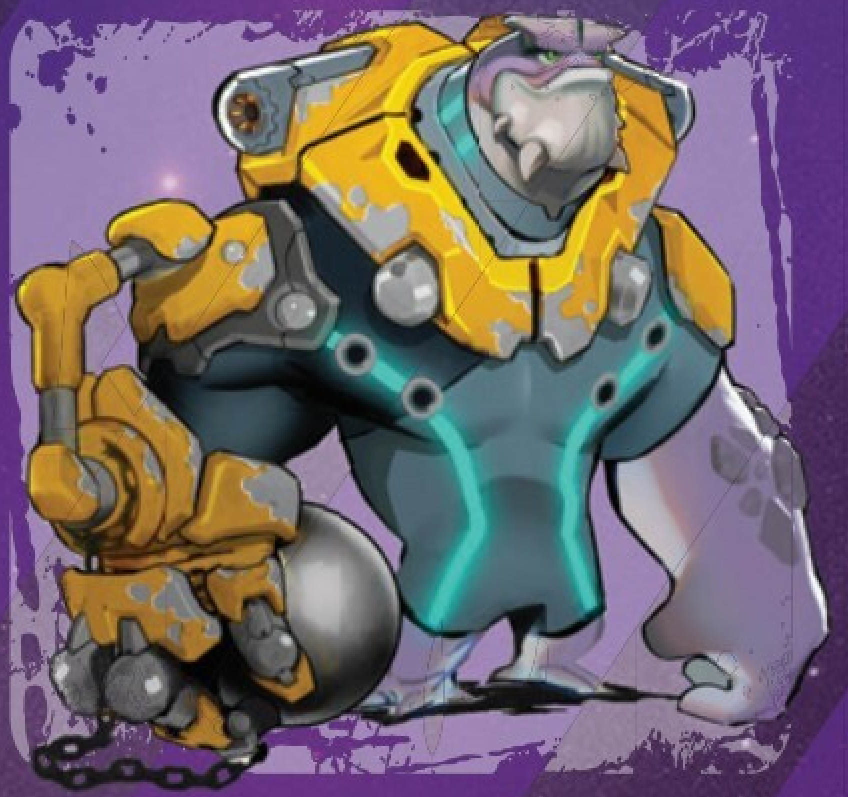


MAGNE

Part engineer and part scrapper, Magne is a good area-denial character. She wields a massive gun that fires saw blades. These blades embed themselves into the environment. When Magne reloads, she recalls each blade, which can do additional damage to enemies caught in the return-flight path. Magne can also create mobile turrets that help overwhelm her opponents.

PRIMARY WEAPON » **Bladeslinger** – fires circular, magnetically charged blades. These blades magnetize enemies they pass through, which works well with Magne's turrets, since the automated drones prioritize magnetized enemies.

ULTIMATE ABILITY » Magne creates a giant magnetic vortex that does a great deal of area damage.



SUMO

Sumo is a hulking, fish-like creature and a living tank who loves knocking people around. After taking a set amount of damage, Sumo's passive ability activates and his mining suit armor goes into lockdown, reducing the damage he takes, making him a walking shield for other players.

PRIMARY WEAPON » **Dozer** – a mining rock chopper repurposed as a shotgun. Sumo sprays his opponents with a barrage of rocks and debris.

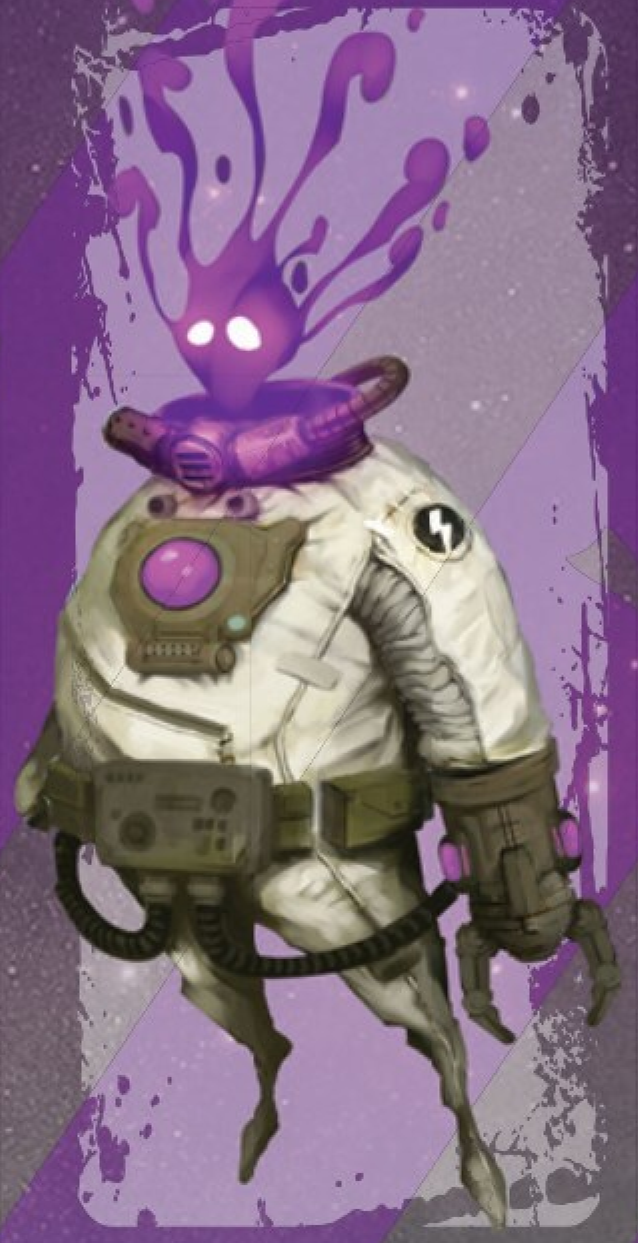
ULTIMATE ABILITY » A massive attack where Sumo spins in place and hits everyone around him with his wrecking-ball melee weapon.

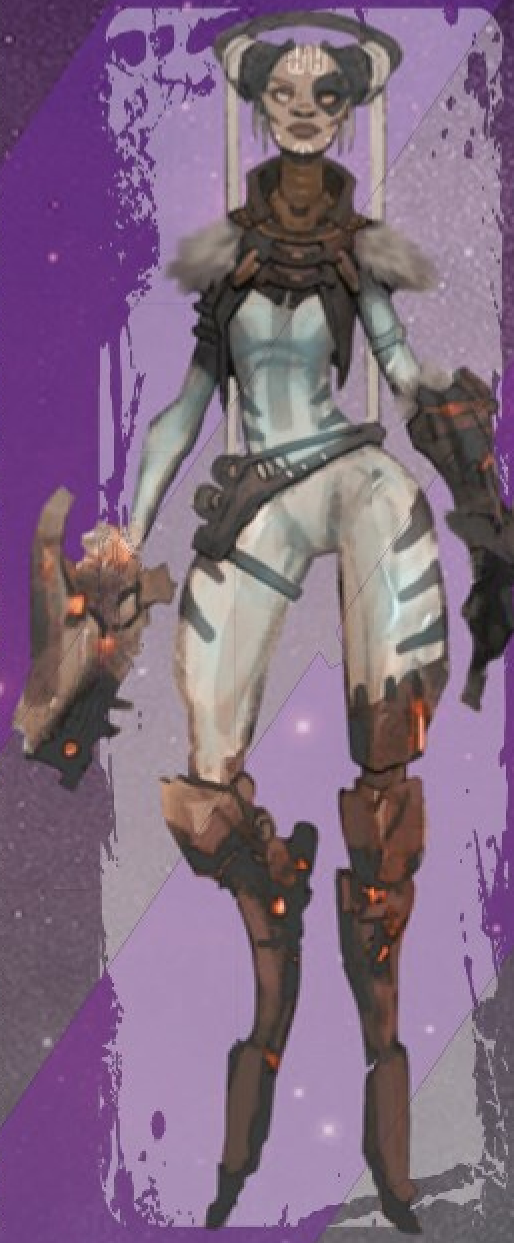
ZIGGY

This celestial being inhabits a spacesuit because he wants to know what it feels like to have a body. Ziggy uses his gun to fire off small amounts of his own celestial gas. Essentially a sniper, Ziggy is portly and not highly maneuverable, but all of his shots pack a punch. His solar wind ability pushes away any enemy with a certain radius. Before Ziggy dies, his body glows orange, and he has the opportunity to rush the opposing team before he perishes in a deadly explosion.

PRIMARY WEAPON » **Spear Gun** – Ziggy crystalizes and launches spears through his specially crafted sniper rifle. These have a chance to pass through enemies and even walls, but they require precision to be most effective.

ULTIMATE ABILITY » Ziggy leaves his body for a limited time and hovers over the battlefield, blasting enemies with lightning strikes. However, if opposing players find his body, they can try to destroy it and take Ziggy out before he returns.





ZOLA

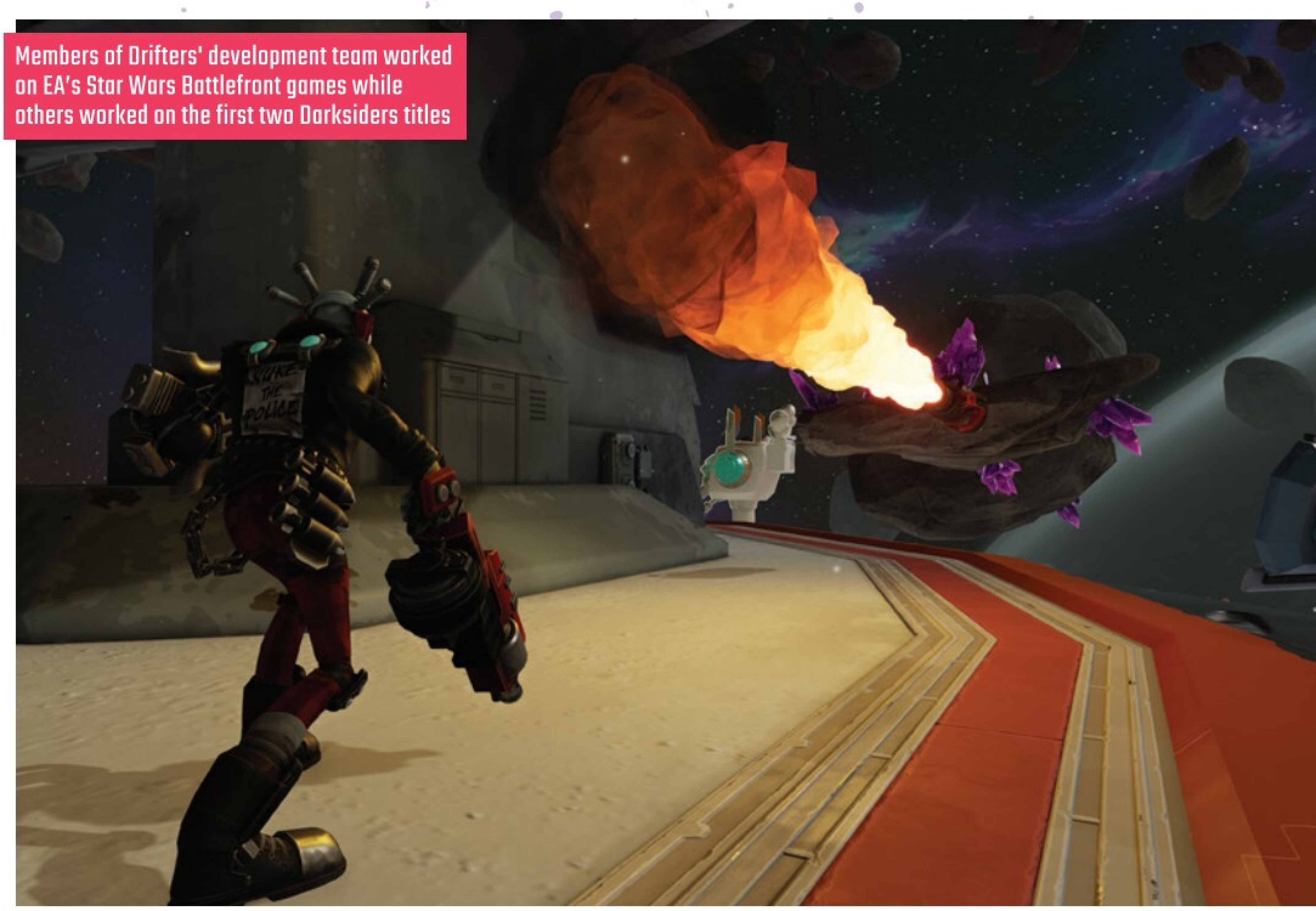
This huntress' body was badly damaged in a fight and has been completely rebuilt, giving her added mobility. Zola's passive ability allows her to see enemies through walls as long as she stands still for a couple seconds. This deadly pirate also has a healing ability and a special spinning grenade that bounces off walls.

PRIMARY WEAPON » **The Falconer** – a lightweight energy weapon, the falconer allows Zola to move quickly and flank her opponents. Its burst damage makes it easy to dash from cover to cover while engaging in flurried combat.

ULTIMATE ABILITY » When activated, Zola can use all of her special skills at the same time (heal blast and throwing discs), and she can also see through walls while moving.

PULP STORYTELLING

Blind Squirrel doesn't want to spend a lot of time delivering story beats to players during the game. Still, the team spent a lot of time dreaming up lore for Drifters' universe, so the studio has teamed up with boutique comic publisher Vault Comics to further explore Drifters' narrative. "They saw our characters and were really interested in doing something with them, and helping us out on the narrative side," says creative director Haydn Dalton. Vault's Drifters series will further explore the game's world and characters when it releases alongside the game near the end of the year.



Members of Drifters' development team worked on EA's Star Wars Battlefront games while others worked on the first two Darksiders titles

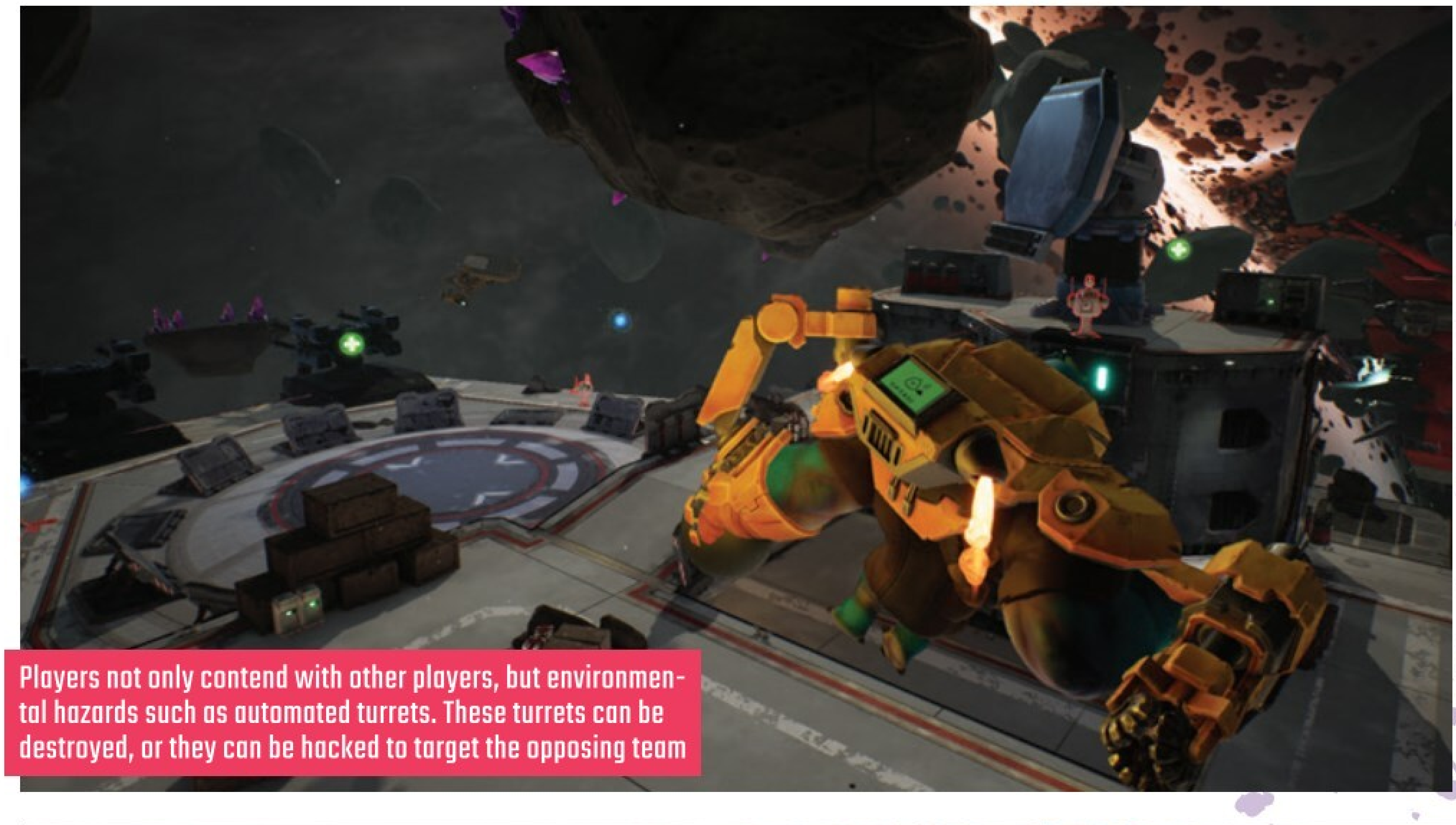
GRAB AND SMASH

In a lot of ways, Drifters looks like a hero shooter in the vein of Blizzard's Overwatch, but Blind Squirrel is aiming for the more bombastic feel of Nintendo's premier fighting game.

"We liked the idea of taking the arcadey elements from Power Stone and Super Smash Bros.," Dalton says. "The things we like about Super Smash Bros. is how the characters react to the action. We have a lot of stuff that either knocks you back, causes you to skid out of control, or sends you 40 or 50 meters away. Players can use their jetpacks to recover and do all these acrobatic feats, and when you knock people into walls you really feel it. There's almost a cartoony aspect to it. We want to make sure there is a little bit of comedy to the game."

Blind Squirrel is still looking for a publisher, which could change its targeted release, but the studio is currently planning to launch Drifters near the end of the year as a free-to-play game. If that launch goes well, the team has a long list of features it hopes to integrate down the line.

"Our original plan was for up to 12 months of free life-support after the game's release," Dalton says. "Every three months a new character. New game modes every other month or something like that, and new vanity items and gear rolling out all the time. So we already have ideas for a 12-month schedule, but we'd like to keep going with it. We really think there's a space for a lighthearted arcadey experience that we don't really see a lot of anymore." ◆



Players not only contend with other players, but environmental hazards such as automated turrets. These turrets can be destroyed, or they can be hacked to target the opposing team

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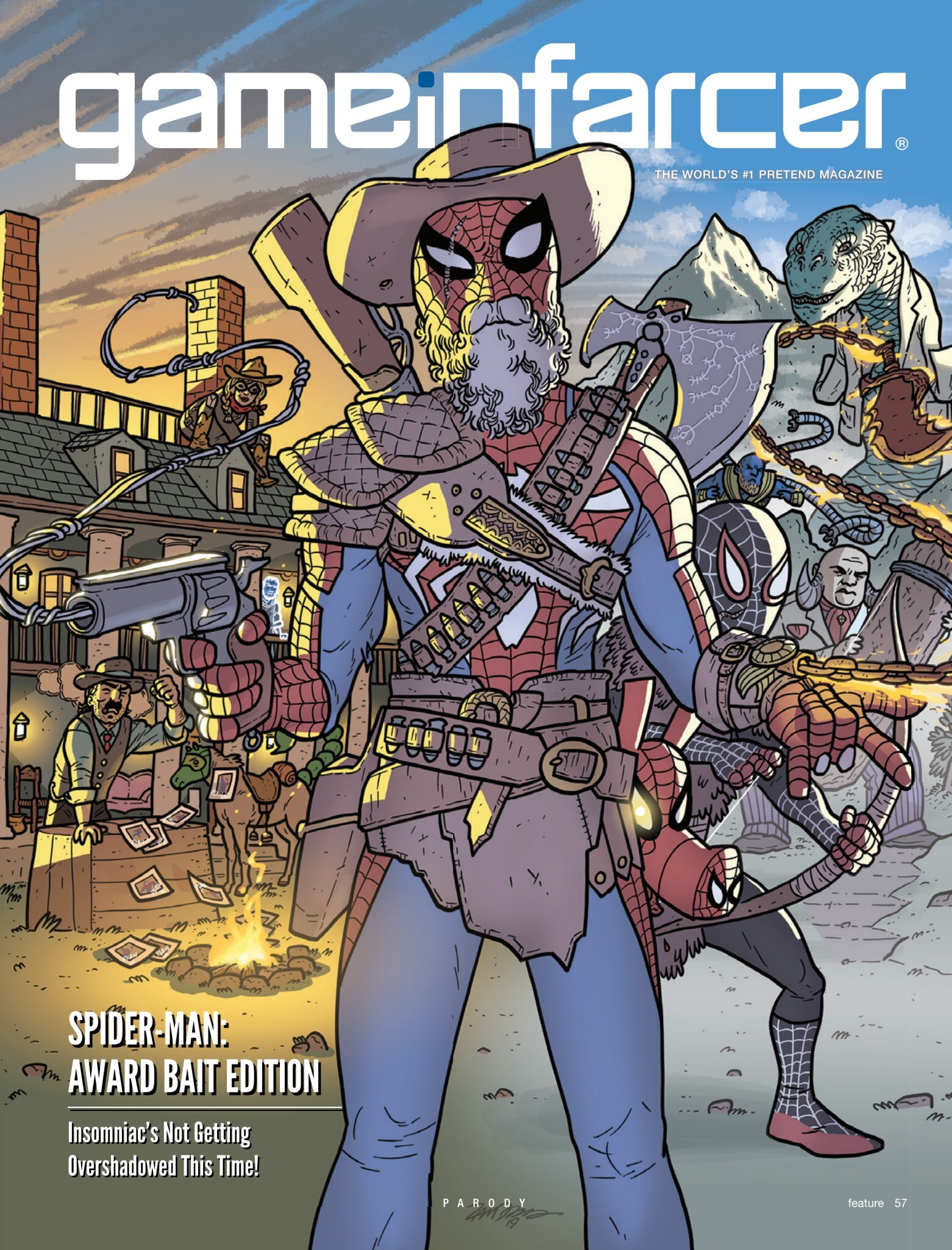

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SPIDER-MAN: AWARD BAIT EDITION

Insomniac's Not Getting Overshadowed This Time!

PARODY

The Logical Defense Of Microtransactions

DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For the correct opinions about the video game industry, follow @GI_Darth

Sometimes being the only enlightened gamer is hard. For example, I see everyone complaining online about how microtransactions are making games worse and ruining the industry – but no one actually considers the issue from all sides. Since you all seem incapable of seeing the good in microtransactions, prepare to have a real professional explain it to you.

Microtransactions are not about publishers trying to "milk" gamers for their money. It's about gamers getting more out of their favorite titles. Back in the day, you'd be stuck with whatever was on the disc when it shipped. Today, microtransactions allow you to continuously receive new content. But guess what? That content isn't free, and game developers deserve to be compensated for creating it. Thinking you should get something for nothing is the height of entitlement.

Also, microtransactions make your characters more powerful, which is always a good thing. No one cries foul when you level up normally and get a new ability, or find a chest with a cool weapon – but if you pay real money for those things, suddenly having a strong character is bad? "But it throws the competitive balance off," you may whine. That's the point! Why pay for better gear or more XP (which I can easily afford) if I can't wipe the floor with some cheapskates? Survival of the fittest, friends.

Here's the hilarious part: Microtransactions obviously work. They continue to exist because people like them and spend money on them. If you hate them so much, maybe you should examine what's wrong with you, not them. What are you going to do instead? Not buy games with microtransactions? Good luck.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

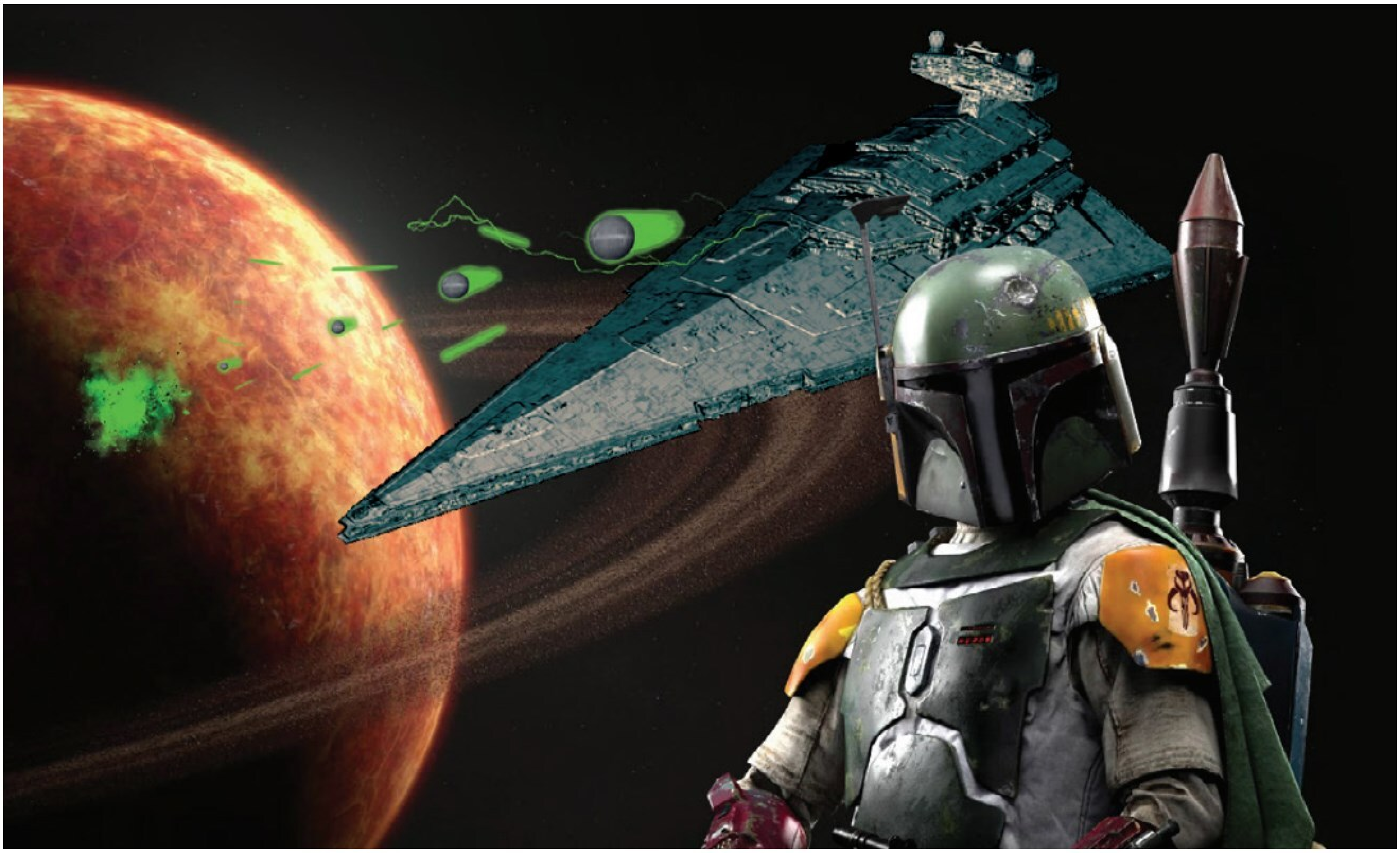
EA Announces Canceled Star Wars Game

Star Wars continues to be one of the hottest entertainment properties in the world, and the video game steward of the franchise, Electronic Arts is keeping its streak alive. The company recently held a press conference to announce a brand-new Star Wars game and reveal the title will ultimately never see the light of day.

The untitled project was a single-player, open-world, Knights of the Old Republic successor that focused on powerful Jedi and epic space combat. It had a story that featured Darth Vader, Yoda (the puppet version, not the computer-generated one), Boba Fett, and basically every other fan-favorite character. Plus, at the very beginning, the game prompted players with the question "Is *The Last Jedi* canon?" Depending on your answer, the game provided two completely different storylines.

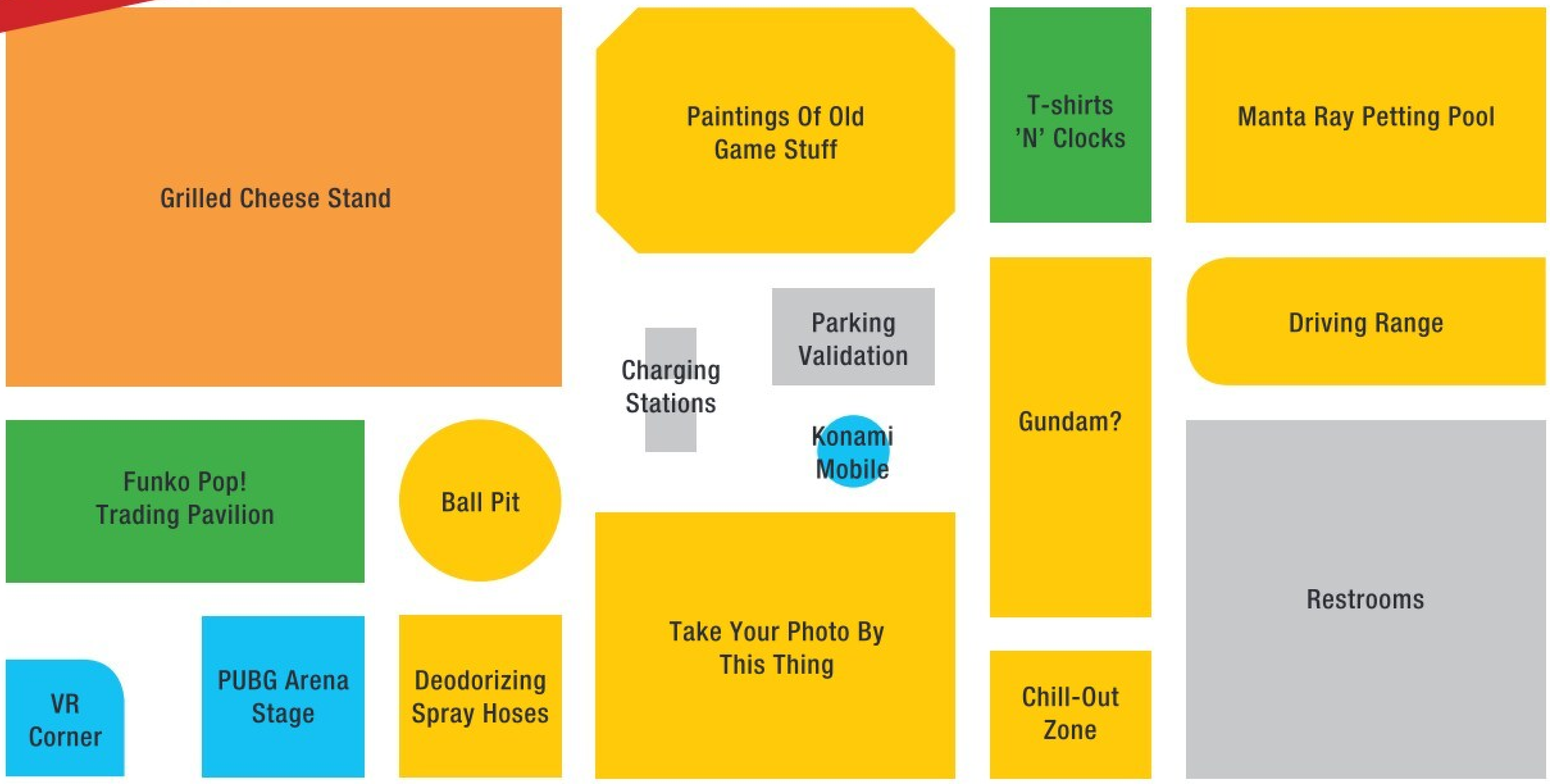
At the event, EA showed footage of Star Destroyers that fired Death Stars as projectiles, and the lightsaber battle between Asajj Ventress and Mara Jade had the coolest choreography in the history of the franchise. Then EA president Andrew Wilson took the stage to say the game had been canceled.

"Despite having all of the ingredients of a successful game, we just can't release this," Wilson said. "This story is too conclusive and satisfying, which makes it impossible to develop as an annual series. Plus, we just couldn't make loot boxes make sense in the context of the story." Development on the project was 80-percent complete.



YOUR GUIDE TO THE E3 SHOW FLOOR

It's an exciting time to be a gamer! The ESA has revealed the floorplan for E3 2019, so attendees can begin to plan their days. Yes, major players like Sony, Microsoft, and EA might be forgoing traditional booths, but E3 organizers say there's plenty for fans of gaming to do!



Grilled Cheese Stand
Paintings Of Old Game Stuff
T-shirts 'N' Clocks
Manta Ray Petting Pool
Charging Stations
Parking Validation
Gundam?
Driving Range
Konami Mobile
Funko Pop! Trading Pavilion
Ball Pit
Restrooms
Take Your Photo By This Thing
VR Corner
PUBG Arena Stage
Deodorizing Spray Hoses
Chill-Out Zone

g.b.u.

The Good

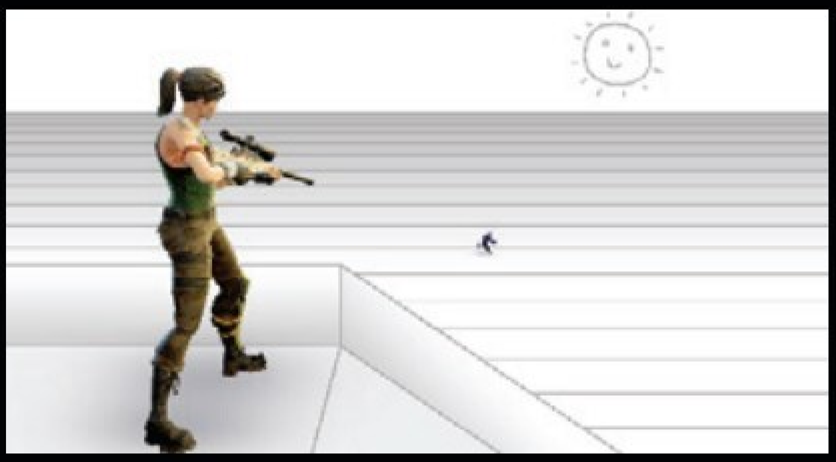
Want to start streaming, but don't have the money for one of those **FANCY CHAIRS**? You're in luck. DXRacer is releasing a new budget version of its go-to model, sewing the chair-back into a standard cotton T-shirt. Your viewers won't know the difference! You won't get all the comfort, but you'll get all the cred.

The Bad

Realizing **ANTICIPATION IS BETTER THAN REALITY**, Square Enix has announced a recall for all copies of Kingdom Hearts III (physical and digital) so that its release can be redelayed to maintain excitement.

The Ugly

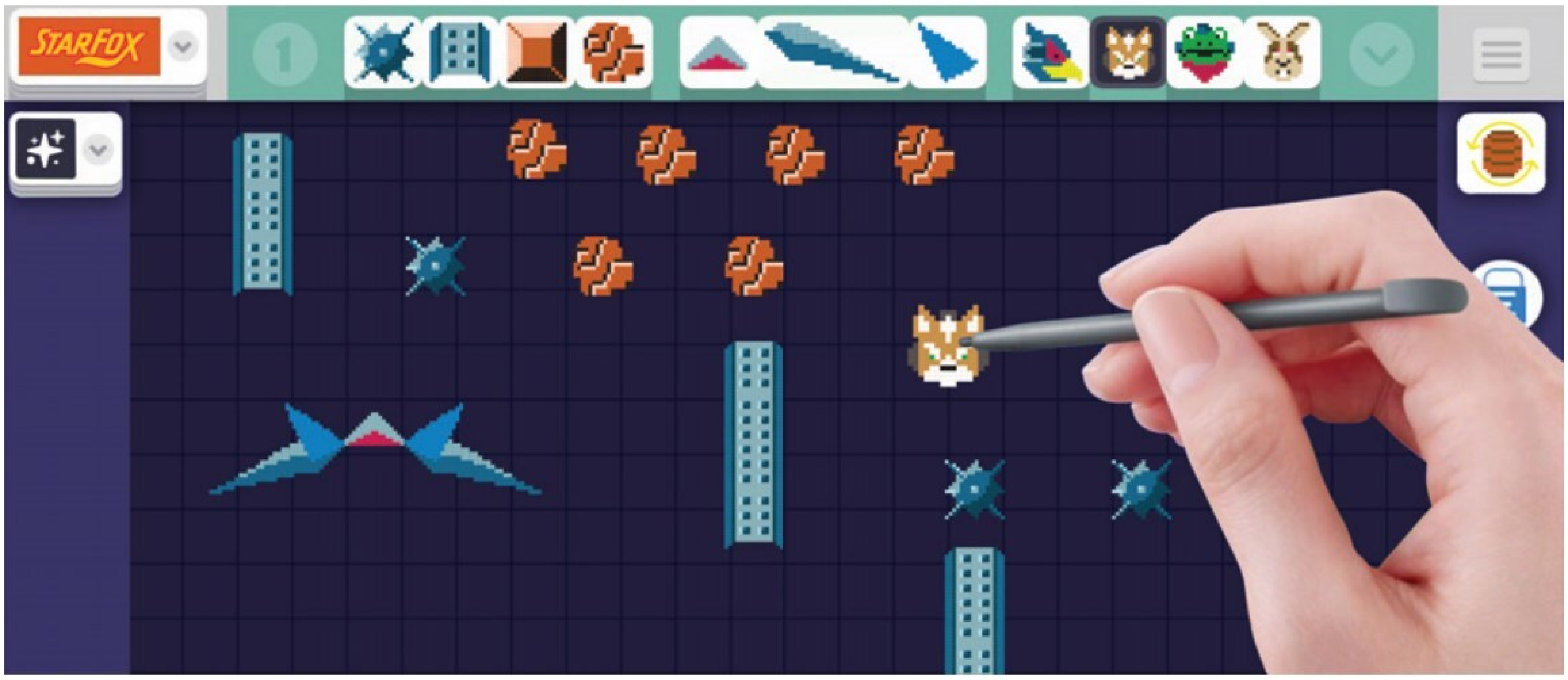
Publisher Epic Games recently **SETTLED A NUMBER OF LAWSUITS** from parties claiming ownership of various things included in Fortnite. The list includes: the construction workers' union (building), Tom Cruise (that weird run), and the Federal Aviation Administration (the sky). Epic Games says these things will be removed from Battle Royale in the next update. Maybe then people will play Save the World mode?



Quotable

> "The new design is based on the monster that began following me when I was a child, and continues to this day. I added the hat, though."

Resident Evil 2 Remake director **Kazunori Kadoi**, on the inspiration behind the new Mr. X



Star Fox Maker

Do It Yourself

» Platform
Swatch

» Style
1-Player ????

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
You or your friends

» Release
Whenever you get off your lazy butt

Fans who haven't been happy with how Nintendo has tarnished the beloved Star Fox series can finally tarnish the company's space shooter themselves! Similar to Nintendo's Super Mario Maker, which provided a slick set of tools for creators to whip together Mario levels, Star Fox Maker allows you dream up your own bad ideas for Star Fox. "Basically, we give up," said Nintendo's Bill Trinen. "You want Star Fox? You make it."

Nintendo's tools have expanded greatly since the last Maker game. Now players can create 3D worlds, animate massive spaceships, and implement their own ill-advised motion controls. This new flexibility means players will need to get their hands dirty by learning the programming languages C# and JavaScript to tweak physics calculations and modify inverse kinematics animations. With that kind of power, the community is bound to come up with wacky and inventive creations!

Is Star Fox a cat now? Maybe. Is Star Fox's ship a living creature that is fueled by the souls of your enemies? That's up to you. Has Star Fox finally stepped out of the cockpit to pursue a peaceful life in a card-based farming simulator? He could. "As long as you can imagine it, you can make it in Star Fox Maker," said Trinen. "Except maybe an on-rails shooter. Those are just too hard."

Nintendo hopes that this is the start of a new wave of games in the Maker series, which will eventually include other properties that the company doesn't really care about, such as F-Zero, Earthbound, Chibi-Robo, Love Tester, Pilot Wings, and Metroid.
» **Darth Clark**

Mortal Kombat 12

Get over here (and look at this mole)

» Platform
W2 • 1040 • IRA

» Style
1 or 2-Player Squabbling

» Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive

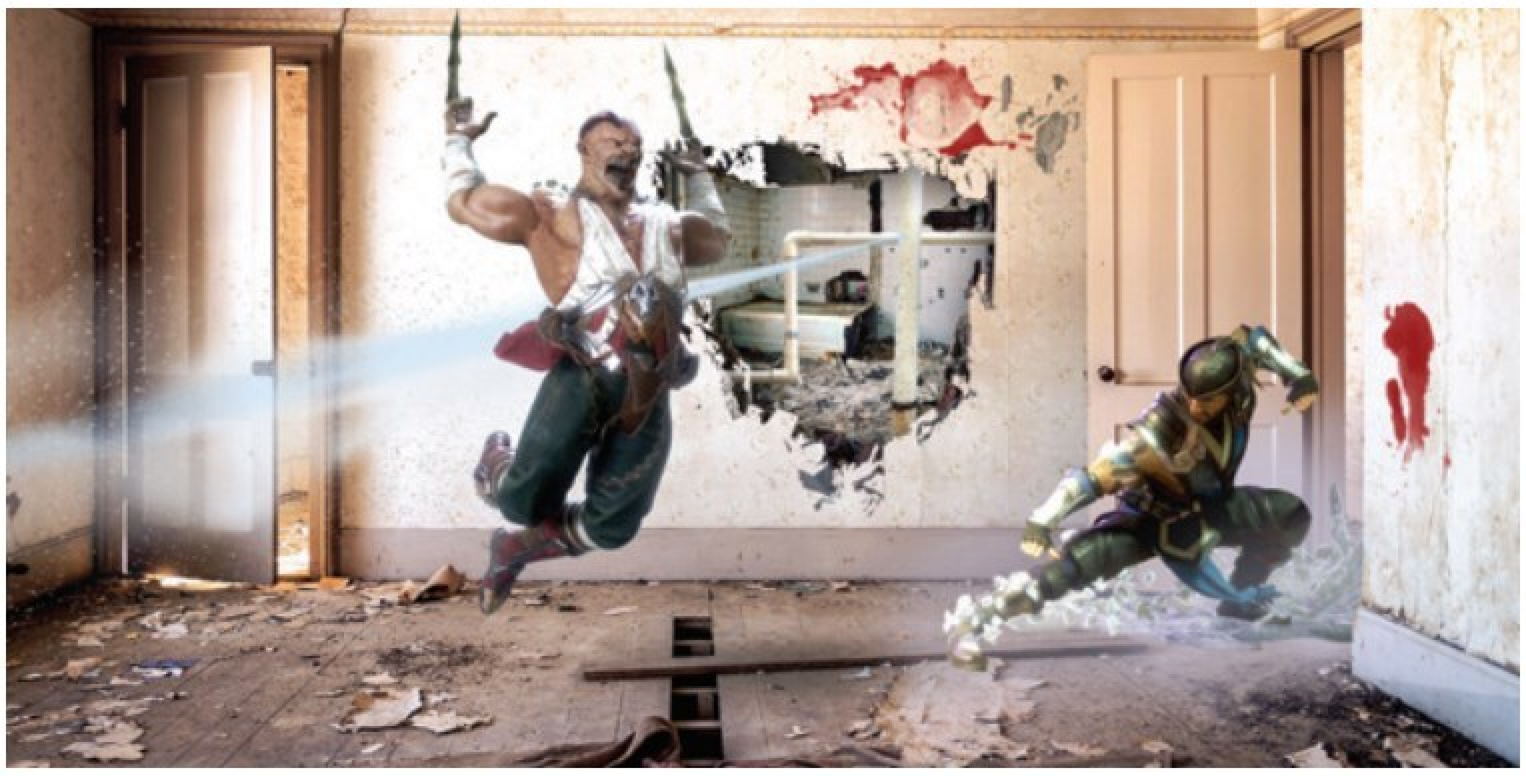
» Developer
Netherrealm

» Release
After that next superhero one comes out

As Mortal Kombat's original fan community aged, creator Ed Boon realized a generation who grew up on decapitations and dismemberments aren't easily shaken by graphic displays of violence. "When MK 11 came out, we were expecting people to barf their brains out," he says. "Seriously, Scorpion pokes out a guy's eyeball from the back of his freaking skull!" Instead, desensitized players responded with shrugs. With the next entry, Netherrealm is hoping to capitalize on subject matter that will shock 30-somethings.

The answer? Banalities. These new moves highlight the terrifying problems older gamers face, which Boon says are more immediate and emotionally crippling than the Fatalities of yore. "Anyone can peel off a face or dice a corpse into a pile of cubes," Boon says. "Property-tax increases? Dead spots on lawns? The inexplicable popularity of video game streamers? Those are the things that truly terrify our original fans."

We saw banalities in action during a demo match. Jax defeats Baraka in a basement laundry-room brawl, but he doesn't yank off the monster's limbs. Instead, the metal-armed hero reaches up and yanks on the pipes above him. Water sprays everywhere, as Baraka looks on helplessly. "This is going to cost a fortune to repair," he wails before collapsing to his knees. Then the toasty guy pops up.
» **Darth Clark**



Call Of Duty: Shadow Interface

Trimming the fat

Style 1-Player Shooting the breeze (Always Online)
Publisher The very profitable Activision
Developer People who make Activision profitable
Release Like clockwork **Rating** T for tweaking

Last year, Infinity Ward made the bold move to cut Call of Duty's single-player campaign in order to focus on a more polished multiplayer experience. This year, the team has doubled down on that approach and made additional cuts to the deathmatch and battle-royale modes to focus on a better user experience. To be clear, the team hasn't added any new modes or brought back the campaign, but one look at Call of Duty: Shadow Interface's stunning new menu system proves that no expense has been spared.

The game starts on a flashing title screen that features so many explosions I actually ruptured one of the blood vessels in my eye just looking at it. This stunning fireworks display was so awe-inspiring that I had to drag my roommates out into the living room so it could blind them too; they were very impressed.

During the opening options scroll I adjusted the gamma settings to best fit my display, remapped my controller inputs, and even tweaked the size (and color!) of the captions. The entire game runs as a silky 60 fps, even in 4K. I didn't even notice a drop in framerate while playing split screen. That's right, you and a friend can both navigate Call of Duty's web of setpiece menus together. I also enjoyed this year's Zombies mode, which is a single page full of images of zombies you can scroll through, making it the best iteration of the concept to date.

The sound settings menu definitely contains its own "No Russian" moment, but I don't want to spoil that here. Let me just say that you probably don't want to eat a heavy meal before playing this game. I buy and play Call of Duty every year, so I've grown a little numb to its antics, but this year really threw me for a loop. I'm sure some crybabies will cry about missing features, but Shadow Interface is a pretty solid entry overall. » **Darth Clark**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch II • PC 3

» **Concept**
Continue stripping away unnecessary elements of the Call of Duty experience

» **Graphics**
The lines are very clean, and the text couldn't be clearer

» **Sound**
Pleasant blips and chimes signal when you have moved your cursor or changed a setting

» **Playability**
A staggering number of gameplay options for pros and newcomers alike. Invert Y axis? Done. Tweak look sensitivity? No problem

» **Entertainment**
Lots of "Did you see that!?" moments, like switching tabs and adjusting sliders

» **Replay Value**
Maybe

OPTIONS
BUTTON LAYOUT
CAMPAIGN
MISSION SELECT
INDUCTION
SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA
INDUCTION
ATLAS
TRAFFIC
FISSION
AFTERMATH
SELECT BACK

Fallout
NEW
76

Fallout New 76

How about this? Do you like this?

Style Suddenly Single-Player
Publisher Bethesda **Developer** Cool Bethesda
Release Probably too late **Rating** M

Fallout New 76 looks a lot different from the game you played the first two hours of and wrote off forever a few months ago. We don't usually re-review games that have already released, but Bethesda's impressive efforts to repair its game (and reputation) with the massive Fallout New 76 update demands we give it another look.

The new overhaul changes almost everything about the base game. Instead of taking place in West Virginia in 2102, the action is now set in Nevada in 2281. The new setting allows players to explore a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas, which turns out is a very cool location for a Fallout game.

The biggest change with the New 76 update is the removal of all other real-life players, effectively reverting back to a traditional single-player experience. Yes, you lose the opportunity for random players to violently spam greeting animations at you, which is unfortunate. However, Bethesda compensates for that absence by implementing meaningful choice, towns that you want to explore, and a V.A.T.S. system that works the way it's supposed to.

I also applaud Bethesda for its major changes to the story, especially the decision to make it good instead of bad. You're not just some boring nobody now; players now control a courier who navigates the complicated power struggle between multiple factions like the New California Republic and Caesar's Legion. It even has a climactic battle for the Hoover Dam!

Though the game is still a mess of bugs, now they're just charming and silly again. You know, like regular Fallout. » **Darth Clark**

9.76

PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Take that game you hated and make it good by changing it to the thing you love

» **Graphics**
I never thought I would miss these wonky NPC faces

» **Sound**
Could the decision to get Matthew Perry to do new voice work be any smarter!?

» **Playability**
It actually (mostly) works now (sometimes)!

» **Entertainment**
When you get rid of other players and change the game's setting and major mechanics, it gets way better

» **Replay Value**
Finite

STOP
DANGER!
EXTREME FORCE IS AUTHORIZED
NERO

Days Gone

Lookin' for adventure and whatever comes our way

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Sony Bend

» Release
April 26

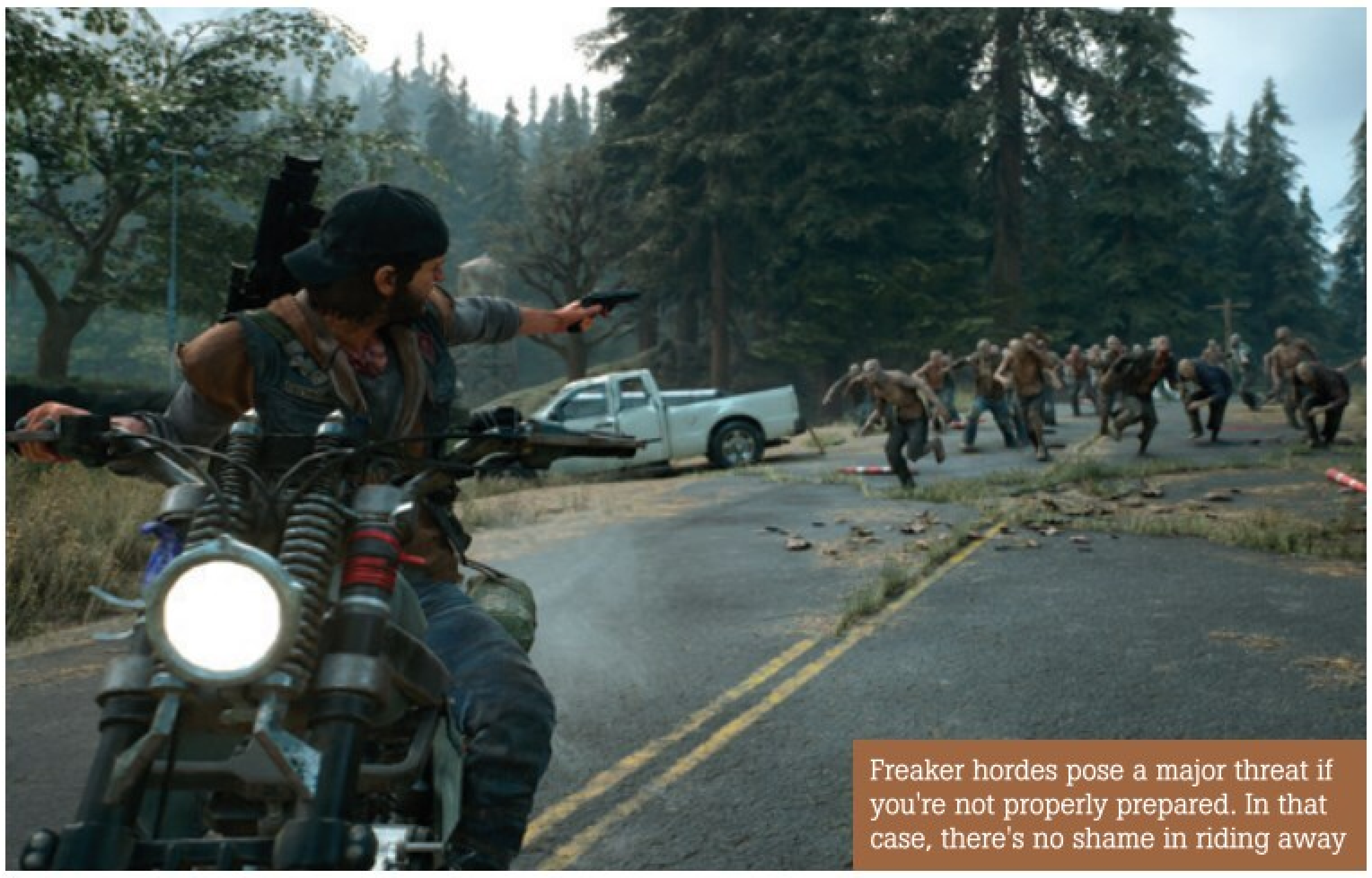
I've made this trip before, and I'm feeling good. Sure, the road is lined with bloodthirsty creeps, but the route to Hot Springs is familiar and I'm confident my bike can outrun anything that comes my way. And sure enough, I'm right. A few infected growl at me as I slow down to round a corner, but they're more interested in chasing down a herd of deer and filling their rotting bellies with venison. Back on a straightaway, I pull hard on the throttle – and catch a neck full of rope. I've been playing Days Gone for four hours and I've made this run several times without incident. What happened? Before I have time to fully collect my thoughts, I'm set upon by a gang of club-wielding maniacs. Game on.

As I learned from that bungled ride, Days Gone is a tough but fair teacher. Its nightmarish vision of Oregon is harsh and unforgiving, and failure is possible with every lesson. Pay attention, and you are rewarded with the thrill of surviving – and even thriving – in this tough world. After an extensive time playing the game, I learned the importance of keeping your fuel tank topped off, why you should keep spare parts on hand, and that the warning text about a nearby horde isn't there to look cute.

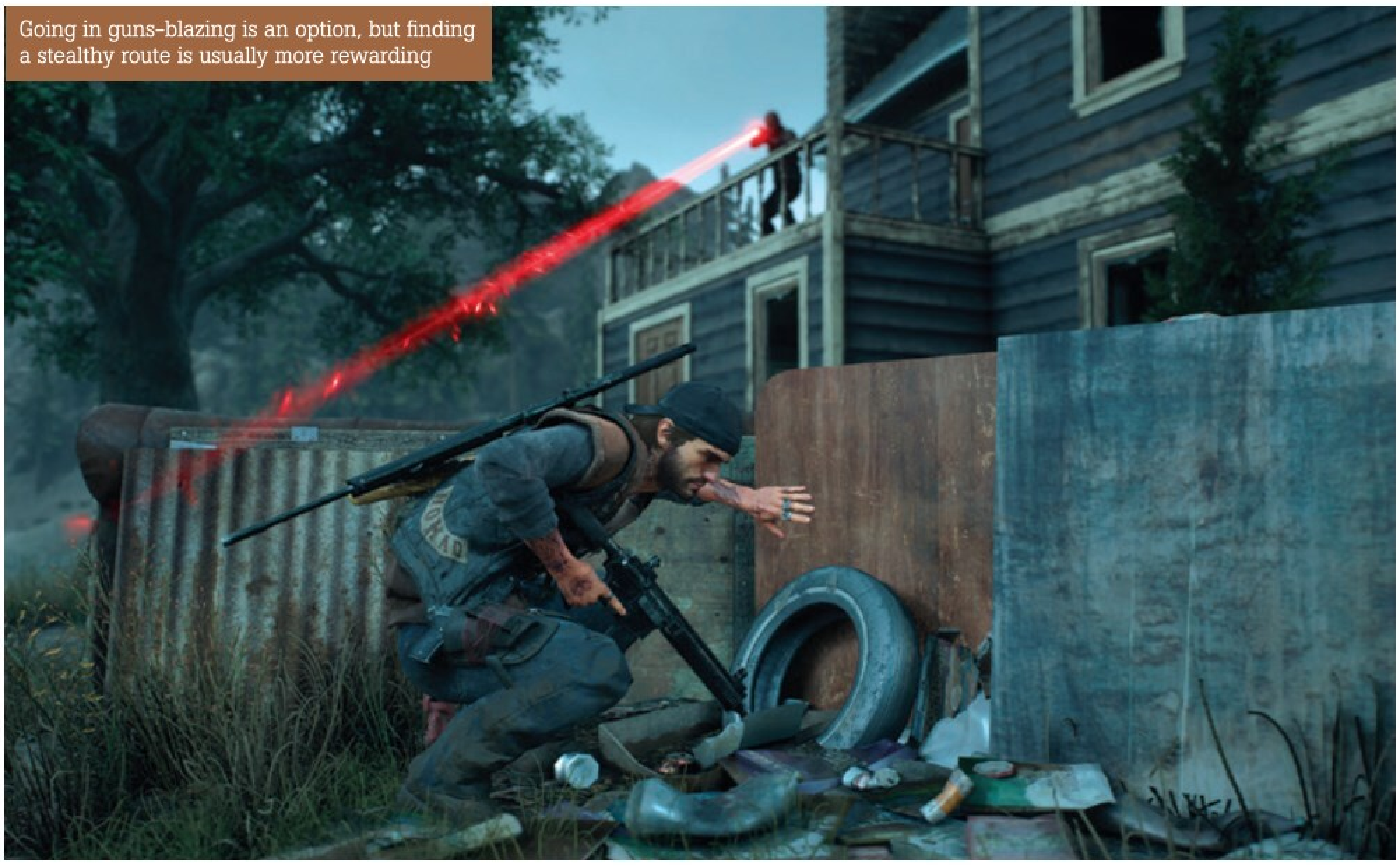
Those ambushers got the drop on me, but I wasn't about to let them finish the job. I hacked away at the trio with an improvised sword made from an old lawn-mower blade. I had put points in my melee attacks, so I was able to deal more damage and unleash longer combos. Still, button-mashing alone wouldn't cut it. For every goon who let me hack him to the ground, another anticipated my next move and juked out of the way – leaving me open for attack as I whiffed. When the last foe hit the ground, I looted their bodies for crafting supplies and got back on my bike.

Unfortunately, that tumble took quite a toll on my motorcycle. I was already limping along, and the crash completely wiped it out. I had a little scrap in my inventory, which was enough to repair it up to a whopping eight percent. I'd have to be even more careful on the ride to Hot Springs, avoiding bumps and resisting the urge to smash through any of the freakers oblivious enough to stand on the road.

The rest of the ride is uneventful, and the gate to Hot Springs opens as I get close. I dismount and head toward Ada Tucker, the camp's leader, to turn in a bounty.



Freaker hordes pose a major threat if you're not properly prepared. In that case, there's no shame in riding away



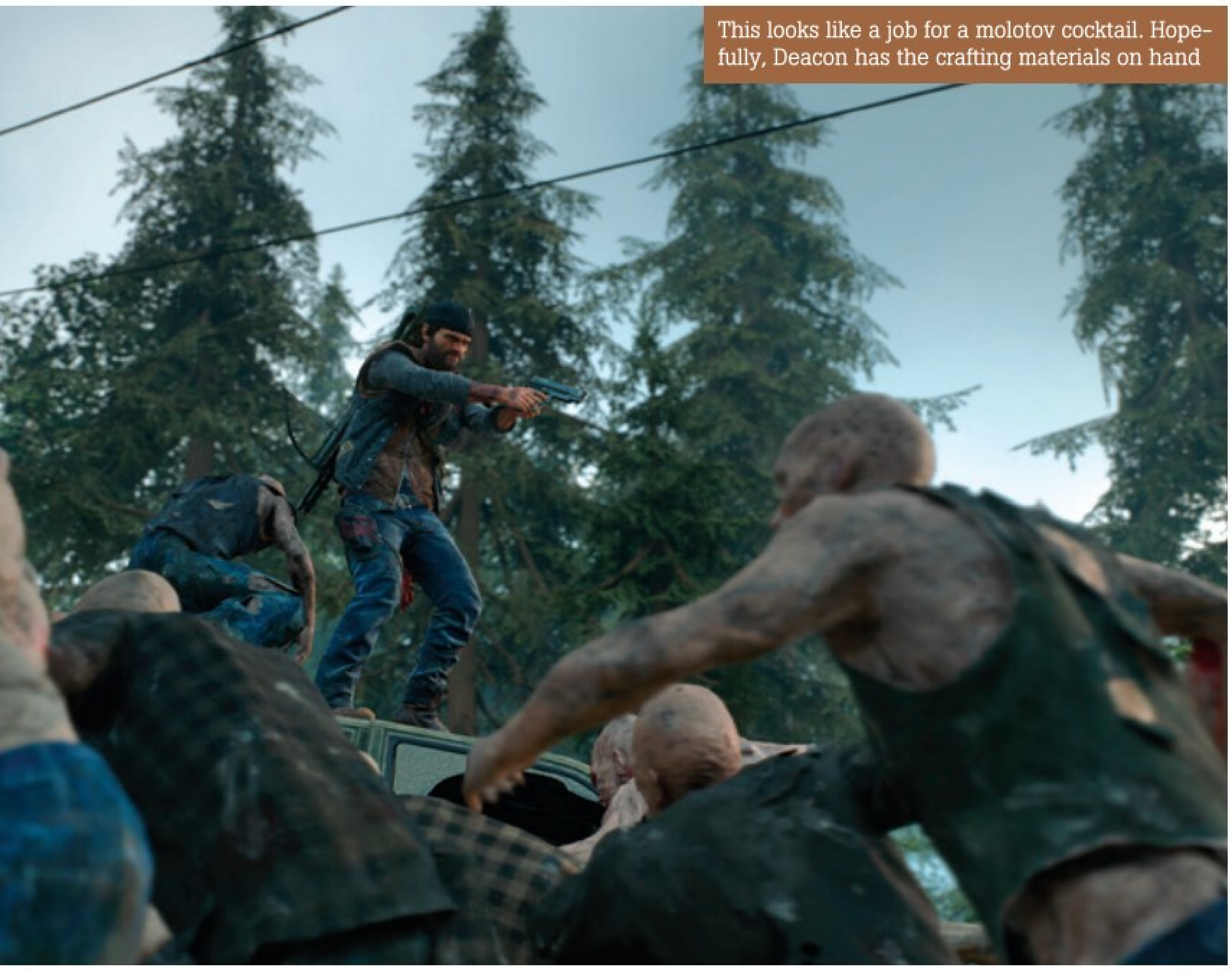
Going in guns-blazing is an option, but finding a stealthy route is usually more rewarding

"There are multiple survival encampments, and each one of them thematically embodies a way of looking at how we could rebuild civilization after the world ends," says creative director John Garvin. "[Ada] was one of the leaders of the state prison, which is part of the back story. … She's going to tell you what to do – basically treating survivors like prisoners. She assumes the worst; they're all thieves, they're all lazy, they're all going to stab you in the back with a shiv if they get the chance."

Tucker may be a hardass, but she respects Deacon. I give her a tire iron that belonged to a guy named Limbo (now deceased), proof that I completed a bounty. In exchange, she gives me information about the location of a possible survivor. I scope out the stores while I'm in Hot Springs, but my reputation isn't high enough to grant me access to the higher-end items. I'll have to prove my worth before they completely open up. I get back on my bike and head toward the lead.

That clue kicks off a series of side missions that involves rescuing a young girl named Lisa, which ultimately puts her in an even worse situation. Without hashing out a beat-by-beat recounting, it's enough to say that most of what I played is well acted and seems plausible for the world Sony Bend has created. And, like most of everything that Deacon does, it ties back into his relationship with his wife, Sarah. She's the ultimate motivation, and I get to see more about their relationship through a series of playable flashbacks. Deacon may not have wowed everyone with a first impression, but the more I play the more I discover that he's not just another dude with a backward baseball cap. These flashbacks show a warmth and vulnerability that feels genuine and, more importantly, not at odds with the man that he's been forced to become.

Back on the road, I drive with a renewed intensity and more focus on what's across the road. And that's what Sony Bend is going for: "Lulling players into a sense of complacency and then all of a sudden, boom, these things happen," says game director Jeff Ross. "Early on when we were tuning this, people were like, 'These things aren't happening nearly enough,' I was like, 'That's the point.' You're supposed to forget that they even exist, and then they get you." Maybe I'll clear out that ambush camp that I've been avoiding, after all. Lesson learned. » **Jeff Cork**



This looks like a job for a molotov cocktail. Hopefully, Deacon has the crafting materials on hand

On The Chopping Block

Sony Bend was exceptionally open and generous during our cover-story visit last year, including a guided and narrated tour of the game's first hour (which you can see at gameinformer.com/daysgone). Playing the same section a year later was fascinating, because so much has changed since that first look. One example is that the game doesn't occasionally pause the action to allow the player to make story decisions as Deacon St. John. What happened?

"It was kind of one of those things where we fought for it for a long time and had binary choices throughout the game, and we did a lot of user testing and at the end of the day it became hard to communicate what the impact of those choices were," says creative director John Garvin. "When we cut them, we found out that we just didn't need them. It made it stronger, and it made it way more clear, and it also helped Deacon's character, to not give the player a chance to make Deacon an a--hole. He's not going to take Boozer's shotgun, and he's not going to leave this guy to be eaten alive. He's got a code, and for the strength of the story and the strength of the character it was a good cut to make for the game."

Game director Jeff Ross says he was a little wary about sharing so much with our cover story, and that he hopes people understand that games change over the course of development. "We're kind of wrestling with that now," he says. "The game was not done at the time we were sharing it, and game development is a process. Before 'choicegate' gets out there, where people start calling us out on things, we share. We were pretty transparent, and I think that's our philosophy moving forward. We set out to do one thing, and I think largely that vision is intact but there are micro course corrections that we've done along the way that I think make for a better game."

Having experienced both versions of Days Gone, I have to say that not freezing time to make choices does help keep the story moving. I wasn't able to see the ultimate consequences of those decisions, so I can't say for certain that they contributed to anything major or interesting down the line. Sony Bend knows its game better than any of us do at this point, and if it is confident that telling a more crafted narrative makes for a stronger story, it's hard to argue with that.

MLB The Show 19

Every team has a story to tell

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1 or 2-Player Sports
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
SIE San Diego Studio

» Release
March 26

Each spring, the teams of Major League Baseball get to see what they have following an offseason of minor tweaks and massive upheavals in hopes of doing better than last year. After an up-and-down year, SIE San Diego Studio has taken player feedback to heart, and is debuting two modes and a host of gameplay improvements to give fans new ways to interact with the game of baseball.

With so many players opting for Franchise's long-term style of play, single-season modes have become less relevant. However, Franchise mode seems to be in the midst of a down year, with real-world contracts and the ability to offer extensions serving as the only noteworthy improvements. But through the new March to October mode, MLB The Show 19 is giving the single-season concept a shot in the arm.

March to October is built around the desire to let players experience their favorite team's season in a more efficient manner. The Show 19 does this by simulating the season, placing you in key games and scenarios to play through that swing of the narrative. These situations include close games in the ninth inning, games against a division rival in a pennant race, and plenty more. These "episodes" can be anything from quick, single-inning situations to full games.

Depending on how you do in a scenario, your team's momentum meter rises or falls, affecting your team's performance in simulations. In addition, episodes that focus on specific players grant season-long attribute boosts for the designated player if you're successful.

Prior to each episode, March to October provides dynamic commentary, telling your team's story to that point. The commentary reacts to the expectations of your team, with each team placed in one of four tiers: Favorites, Contenders, Underdogs, and Longshots. Even if your team is a basement-dweller, like my Baltimore Orioles, the narration provides context for every team based on the tier.

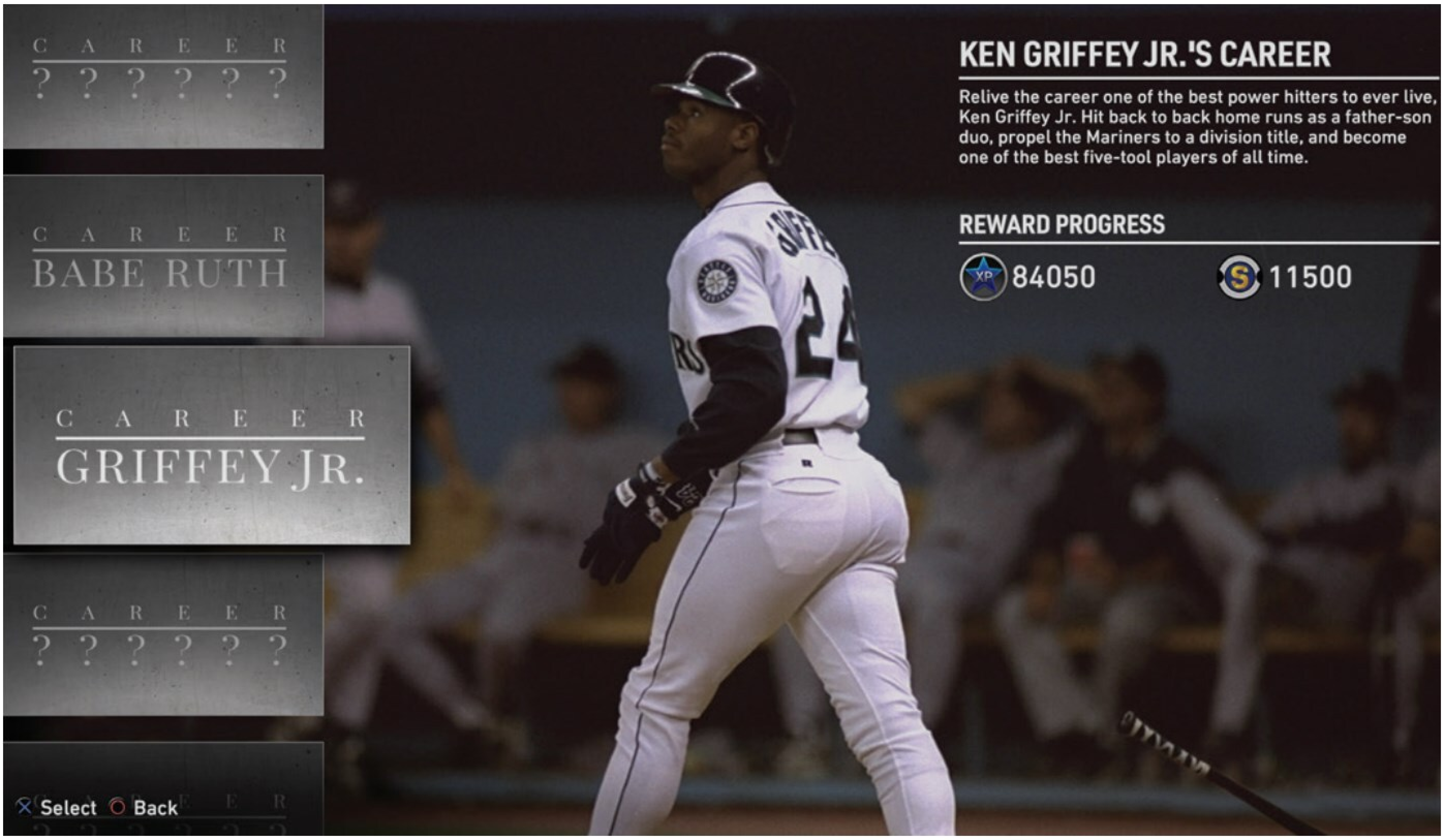
At the end of the season, you get a screen showing the ups and downs, and the option to try again at the start of the season or import your save file into Franchise mode, letting you ride a hot season into the next year if you so choose.

If you're looking for a more bite-sized coming attraction, Moments allows you to participate in some of the biggest plays in baseball history. You take control of legends like Ted Williams, Ken Griffey Jr., and Willie Mays, as well as modern stars like Bryce Harper and Aaron Judge. This mode tasks you with recreating iconic performances as that player, like pitching in the World Series or breaking home-run records as Babe Ruth.

The Moments are broken into five different storylines at launch, with each consisting of 10 to 15 Moments. Each Moment features custom commentary and presentations specific to the scenario. However, fans can expect additional storylines to come after launch, including big plays that happen during the real-world 2019 season.

In addition, the studio is planning "What-if" scenarios, where players can tackle hypothetical situations where a play goes another way than it historically did. Other Moments can rely on having you build a team under certain constraints or playing in a fantasy-style approach where you get to keep a player from a team you beat.

twinsbaseball.com
THE SHOW19
THE SHOW19
THE SHOW19



KEN GRIFFEY JR.'S CAREER

Relive the career one of the best power hitters to ever live, Ken Griffey Jr. Hit back to back home runs as a father-son duo, propel the Mariners to a division title, and become one of the best five-tool players of all time.

REWARD PROGRESS

84050 11500

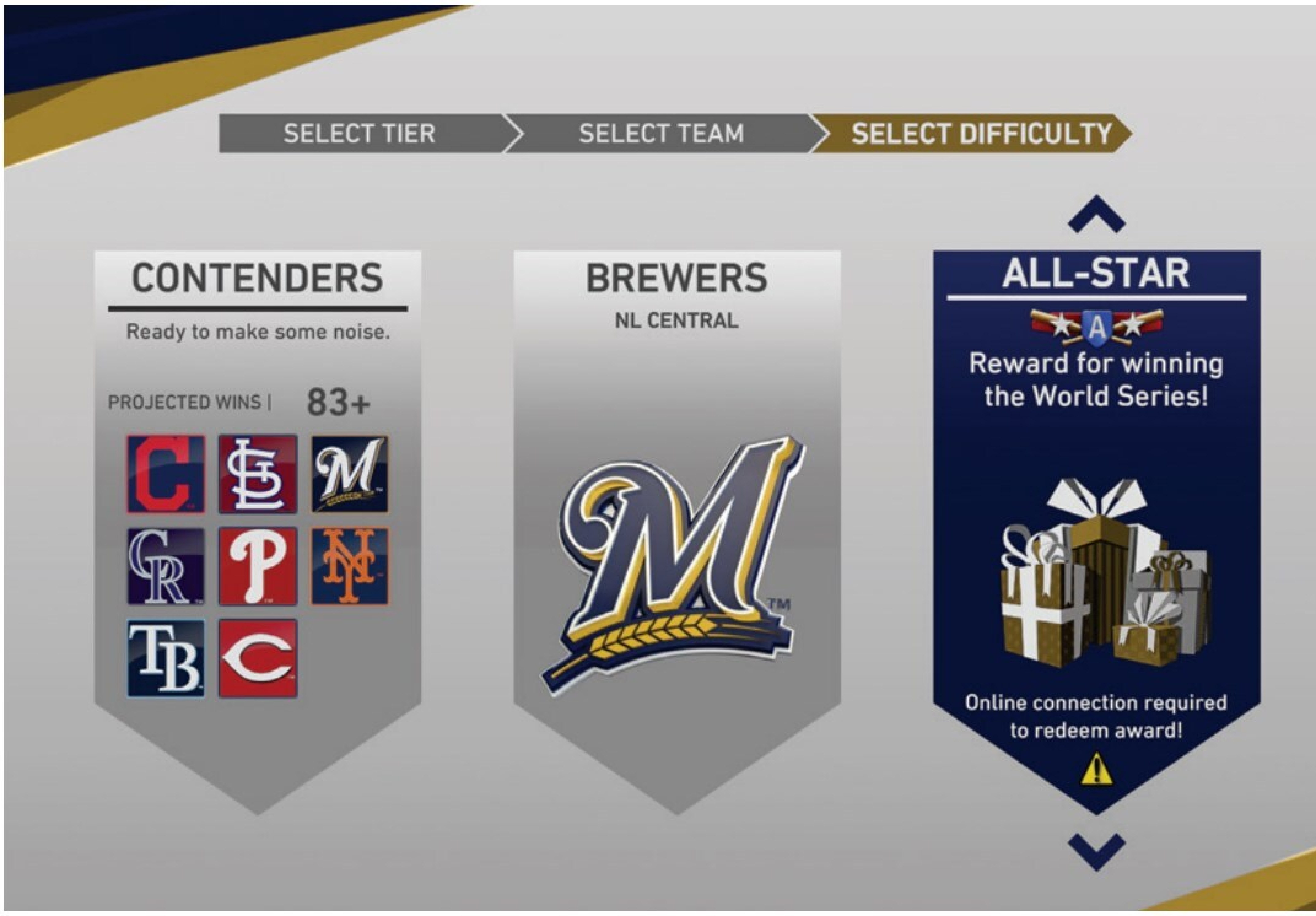
The studio remains tight-lipped on improvements in the other fantasy-driven mode, Diamond Dynasty, outside of new Conquest maps to explore. However, the Road to the Show enhancements will hopefully give new life to the series' long-running career mode. Road to the Show has been trending toward more choice-driven player management in recent years, and with new personality growth and relationships, that concept is more prevalent than ever before.

Using these new mechanics, your character's personality is established based on how you interact with others in the locker room. Depending on the personality role you step into, you'll notice on-the-field effects that align with your role. In addition, you can develop friendships or rivalries, giving your player additional personality-based perks. Road to the Show fans can also look forward to new challenges that you can complete during a game to gain additional rewards to improve your player, playable training minigames in the gym, and retooled archetypes that allow you have more control over the player you're developing.

While these updates sound promising, the gameplay improvements, which include new animations to make throwing out runners more efficient and allow players to stick with errors, stretch across all modes. MLB The Show 19 also tweaks the difficulty settings by making Rookie easier and Legend harder, meaning the game is more accessible than ever, while providing a stiffer challenge for high-skill players.

Power hitters will finally meet their matches in elite pitchers that can more easily counter home run hitters, and contact hitters who don't line and ground out as often. Even bunting has been improved to give players a more varied arsenal than ever before.

With MLB The Show 19 offering so many new modes and improvements, the game's success could hinge on if the online components are more stable than they were at launch last year. We still don't know much about the changes coming to Diamond Dynasty, but we're hopeful some of the extreme-difficulty grinds are toned down to make the mode more casual friendly. We'll see how this season plays out for The Show when it launches on March 26. » **Brian Shea**



CONTENDERS

Ready to make some noise.

PROJECTED WINS | 83+

BREWERS

NL CENTRAL

ALL-STAR

Reward for winning the World Series!

Online connection required to redeem award!

Scavengers

Picking your battles

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» **Publisher**
Improbable

» **Developer**
Midwinter Entertainment

» **Release**
2019

The concept behind Scavengers, according to one of its creators, is to take the resource-allocating experience of a survival sim and isolate it within a free-to-play, match-based multiplayer game. Developed by talent who has previously worked on marquee shooter series like Halo and Battlefield (including former 343 studio head Josh Holmes), Scavengers is a different type of shooter, one in which the impulse to be cutthroat is necessary, but often tempered by the pull of creating alliances with players who could turn on you at any moment.

At the start of a match, teams of four are dropped onto a desolate, frozen wasteland. The conditions have become hospitable just long enough for someone to gather samples of the meteorite that struck this planet and made it inhospitable in the first place and get out alive. This all could provide information on the Scourge virus corrupting local wildlife.

Teams must gather resources for crafting while building up an inventory of gear, food, and usable items. Danger is all over the map, with camps of Scourge-infested animals, highly advanced Salient robots, and human Outlanders looking to raid supplies.

The situation gets interesting when you come across other players, as a number of connecting and conflicting goals complicate these encounters. The main objective of every match is shared by all players. "Individual teams and players will be rewarded for their contributions to both the common goal and any tertiary objectives they may be pursuing within the match," Holmes, creative director on the game, says. What that goal is varies per match, but it usually means shooting another team on sight isn't always a smart call. Sometimes you'll catch a team about to take on enemies you'd rather not fight, which would let you swoop in after they're killed, loot their bodies, and possibly even take out the camp and earn some valuable shards. Or maybe you should signal your friendly intentions to them and take the camp on together. "It's a very intentionally designed Prisoner's dilemma of like, 'What do I do?'" Holmes explains. Anyone who collects samples and extracts safely has something to gain out of each match, but the "winner" is the person who leaves with the most loot, which gives everyone an incentive to play greedy.

Classes also factor into how you play, as characters like Halden can create a healing field to help enemies recover from a fight, while Valora can drop a shield that protects them from any surprise attacks, which is especially beneficial when the team is healing up. According to Holmes, some classes also go beyond the classic healer and tank archetypes. "Crafting plays a big role, so you have these elements that distinguish your characters' active ability, weapon, and its variants you can craft within the session," Holmes says.

Between matches, you can unlock a number of cosmetic options using the shards collected, as well as new weapons, ability options, and crafting recipes to bring with you to the wasteland. However, Holmes says progression is still a work in progress, so we'll have to wait to find out more in the future.

Scavengers is an interesting experiment in the multiplayer field. Holmes sees it as an evolving game, one which will introduce new modes, characters, updates, and options, all of which are subject to change as small batches of people start getting their hands on the game over the course of the year, starting in Summer. » **Suriel Vazquez**

Dangerous Driving

Full throttle ahead

Three Fields Entertainment is composed of former creators of the Burnout franchise, and the DNA of Criterion's arcade-crashing racer permeates Three Fields' previous work, including the bull-in-the-china shop chaos of Dangerous Golf and the Crash mode-inspired Danger Zone series. Dangerous Driving, however, gets straight to the heart of the matter, and for co-founder Alex Ward, this means a specific era of the series: Burnout 2 through Burnout Revenge.

Perhaps tellingly, this span stops just short of Burnout Paradise (2008), which took the franchise into open-world territory while still trying to retain Burnout's original identity. Despite the logical leap Paradise made at the time for the franchise, Ward makes no apologies for his love of a simpler time in video game history, and he is trying to get back to the core ideas that made arcade racers fun in the first place. "This has been my life, in this genre," he says. "This is how I grew up. These are the games I've enjoyed playing and I've always wanted to make."

The eight modes of Dangerous Driving read like a greatest hits of "what ifs" Ward and the rest of the Three Fields team have been contemplating through the years. Road Rage tasks you with taking down as many cars as you can against the clock. Survival is about going as far and as fast as you can before the inevitable crash. Pursuit Mode – which Ward wanted to do for Burnout 3 before Criterion was acquired by EA – puts you in the seat of a cop car giving chase at ramming speed.

The game's 75 events include five tiers split over six car classes. Each of these, like the coupe, SUV, and supercar have their own variants, which might be better suited to certain modes. For instance, the tuned model of a car earns boost quicker, which makes it ideal for a Heat Wave race where you chain boosts. No matter which car you have, like previous Three Fields and Burnout games, you get boost for near misses, drifting, getting air, and producing many other harrowing moments behind the wheel.

As much as Dangerous Driving is familiar, the team wants it to be a step forward for it and the genre as well. Footage from the title reveals the highly detailed carnage and sense of speed one would expect from the studio, but Ward also calls attention to the game's A.I. Programming it isn't just a case of making it select the best racing line like in a sim-racer. The opponent cars have to race the track, you, and the traffic. The latter is particularly challenging for the player and the A.I. given that wrecks are persistent in some modes. And when you're going in excess of 200 mph, the margins of error for everyone are very thin and very sudden.

Dangerous Driving has eight-player multiplayer, and after launch Ward says they're exploring all options, from wheel support to the usual additional modes and tracks. Maybe they'll update this title for a while or maybe they'll make a sequel. Either way, Ward is happy being in the driver's seat. "There's nobody telling us we can't do it," he says. "This is what we formed to do." » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Three Fields
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Three Fields
Entertainment

» **Release**
April 9

Indivisible

Taking the best of Valkyrie Profile and Metroid

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Lab Zero Games

» **Release**
2019

Since its announcement, Indivisible turned heads with comparisons to Valkyrie Profile and Metroid. You have the complexity of the former's battle system, featuring breaking defenses and controlling your party via the face buttons, while the platforming and exploration evokes the latter. After getting delayed to 2019, we checked in on the game's progress and were treated to some new character reveals and combat details.

Indivisible's story centers on Ajna, a girl who can absorb others' powers and wants to discover more about her mysterious gift. Throughout her journey, you recruit party members with unique abilities, while platforming your way through areas with skills to slide, break through floors, and cut through obstacles. Later, the powers you obtain through exploration are more varied, such as using a pogo stick for tough jumps and an ability that forms a protective barrier out of flowers to traverse obstacles and discover new areas.

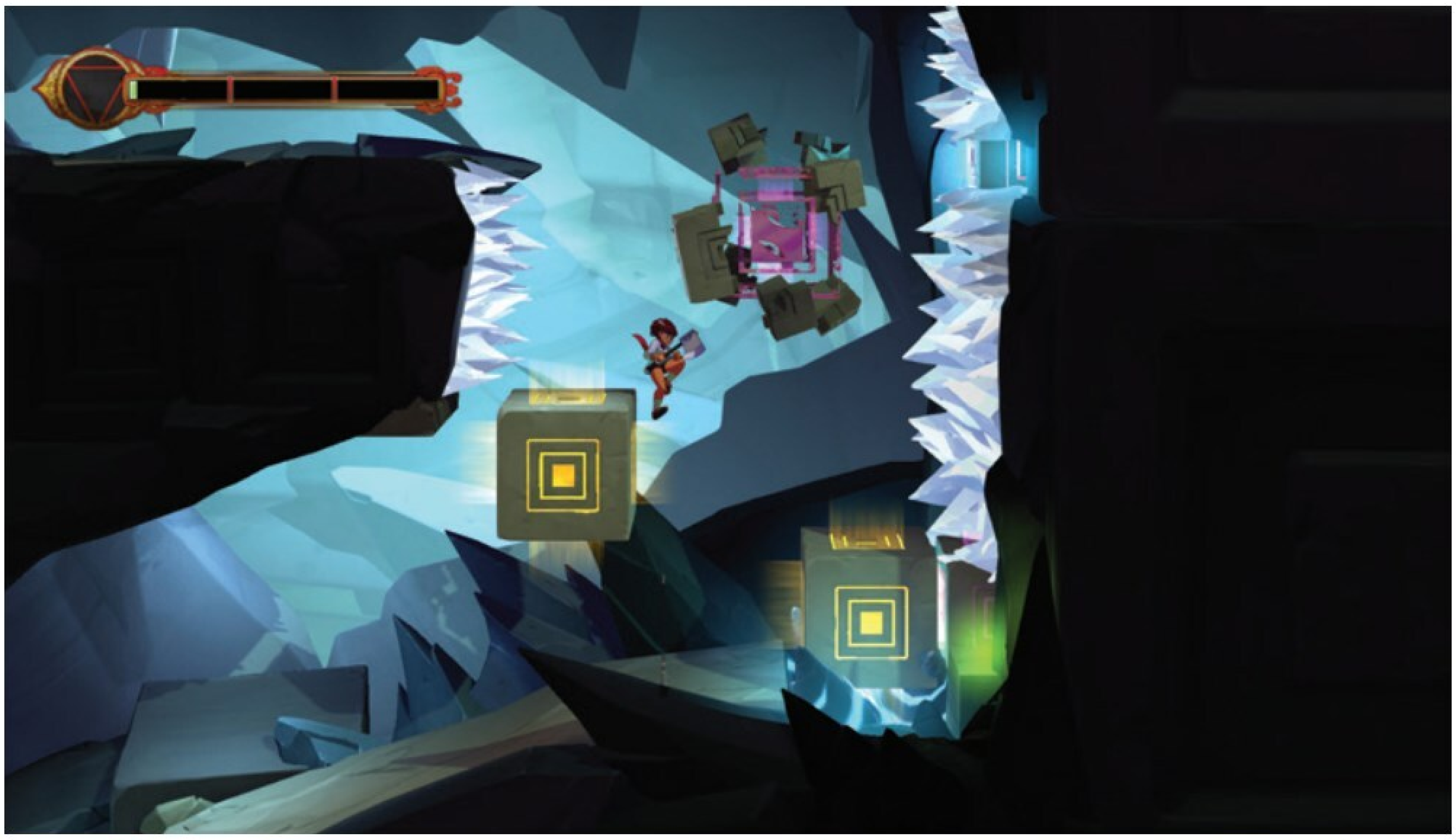
Four characters can be in your party at once, each as one of the four controller face buttons. Some join your party naturally through the story, while others you need to complete special quests to obtain. Up to 25 are available to recruit and you have flexibility in when you get them. "There are no 'lost forevers;' we made sure of that," says founder and director of business development Peter Bartholow.

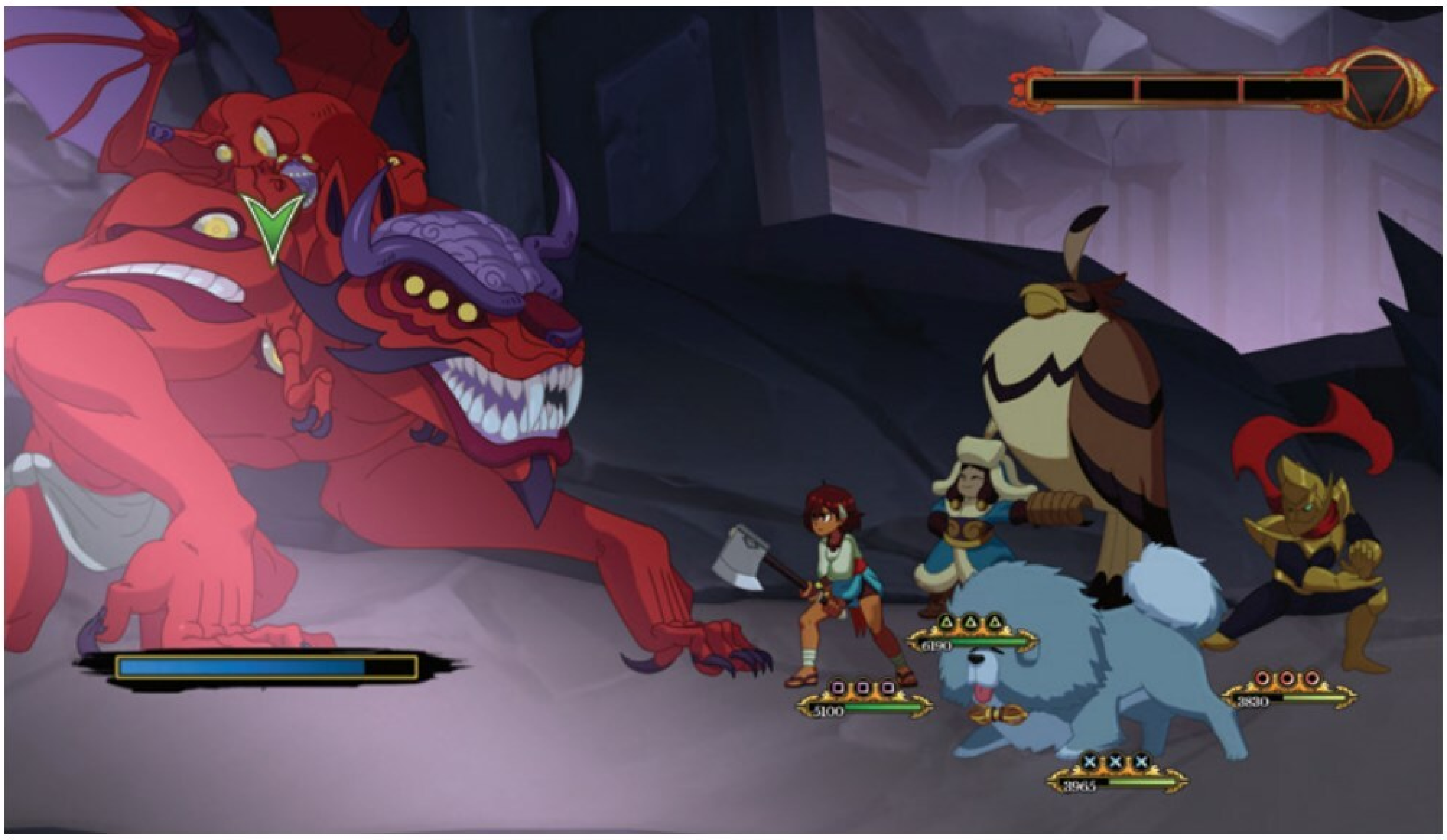
The variety of the combatants' skills is one of the most promising features, as you always feel like you have a unique strategy in hand. Each character feels different, giving you many options to build up to combos to unleash powerful special attacks. We saw a few characters who have yet to be revealed, and they all have interesting skills. For instance, Kushi teams up with her giant bird Alton, who she can send to target multiple enemies at once. She can even ride on his back to use his squawk ability, which deals a small amount of damage to a group, but is extremely valuable as it builds up your party's super meter. She may not have her own super like most characters, but she does have an ability like Final Fantasy's "Jump," where she goes off screen to prevent her from being targeted and comes down later to damage enemies.

Naga Rider, another new character, comes with more than three attacks in a turn. He can move enemies around the battlefield as well, and do Marvel vs. Capcom-style air combos. Lashi, my personal favorite, is a fluffy blue pup with a bow tie who barks to damage enemies. His sleep ability also allows him to take a nap and self-heal, while his collar can shock enemies and shoot lightning. Every character has their perks and vulnerabilities, but when you see them all work in concert, it feels really satisfying.

Since the delay, Lab Zero Games has added some new elements to the turn-based combat. Now if you get hit by an enemy, you have a chance to recover either in the air or on the ground and quickly return to the fray. More additions include having enemy blocking, grabs, and other defensive mechanics. Every party member has a regular attack they can do, but pressing down or up also provides them different abilities in battle. You break guard by doing a down and an up attack in succession. "If you want to mash buttons, you won't really get anywhere once we have harder enemies, so you actually have to figure out how to coordinate your attacks together," explains project lead and deisgner Mike Zaimont. "We are in the process of making battles more like puzzles than just 'hit buttons and see what happens.'"

The mixture of proper placement, timing, and making the most out of your characters' abilities shine through in boss battles, which are often a hybrid mix of RPG and platforming elements. For instance, in addition to fighting with your party, you might have to avoid acid dropping down or getting stomped on by a boss. This clever combination is part of what makes Indivisible worth keeping an eye on when it launches later this year. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Praey For The Gods

Casting its own shadow

Praey for the Gods wears its Shadow of the Colossus inspiration on its sleeve. Players control a lone woman in a mysterious land who must fell gigantic creatures as she explores a frozen landscape. "Many people call them gods," says creative director Brian Parnell regarding what these giants are called (it's a name the community landed on). "The lore page on our Steam discussion group is amazing to me. I love it, and it's exactly what I was hoping to see."

Praey for the Gods was funded on Kickstarter, and it entered early access recently. Along with giving players a chance to tackle a collection of the game's "gods," this early version also showcases what separates the game from Shadow of the Colossus. After taking down the initial tutorial creature, you are let loose on a surprisingly open world. You must also keep an eye on your sleep, warmth, and hunger. If any of those drop too low, you won't be equipped to take on the giants that awaken and attack you when you get near.

You manage those meters by collecting items scavenged from the environment, and you can also find bows and melee weapons to use on random enemies between boss battles. You don't need those weapons to fell the gods, and they break over time. "I figured most melee weapons would be kind of tricky or at least silly on a boss, i.e., hitting their toes," Parnell says. "And by having them be limited allows the player to try new approaches."

Along with the survival mechanics, you also have access to a grappling hook to help you climb the creatures. A small parachute lets you float to the ground and helps with exploration. The parachute, stamina mechanics, climbing abilities, and scavenging options make the game reminiscent of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild in an intriguing way. "I'm a huge Zelda fan, and had been playing Skyward Sword with my son for about three years (we played once a week together), so that was seeping into our early design decisions without me really realizing it," Parnell says. "Inspirations also came from Deus Ex – my favorite game – with multiple paths to getting on a boss and some other games we were fond of."

The early access version of the game does not feature all the gods or the true ending, but it offers a substantial taste with multiple creatures – some of which have familiar designs, and others that I don't want to spoil here. As development stands now, the Kickstarter goals have been met, but the team at No Matter Studios isn't ready to move on to bug squashing and balancing just yet. "We love working on this game and are looking to add a couple more bosses prior to our 1.0," Parnell says. "We're also looking to continue to shape the game based on the feedback we've been receiving."

» **Kyle Hilliard**

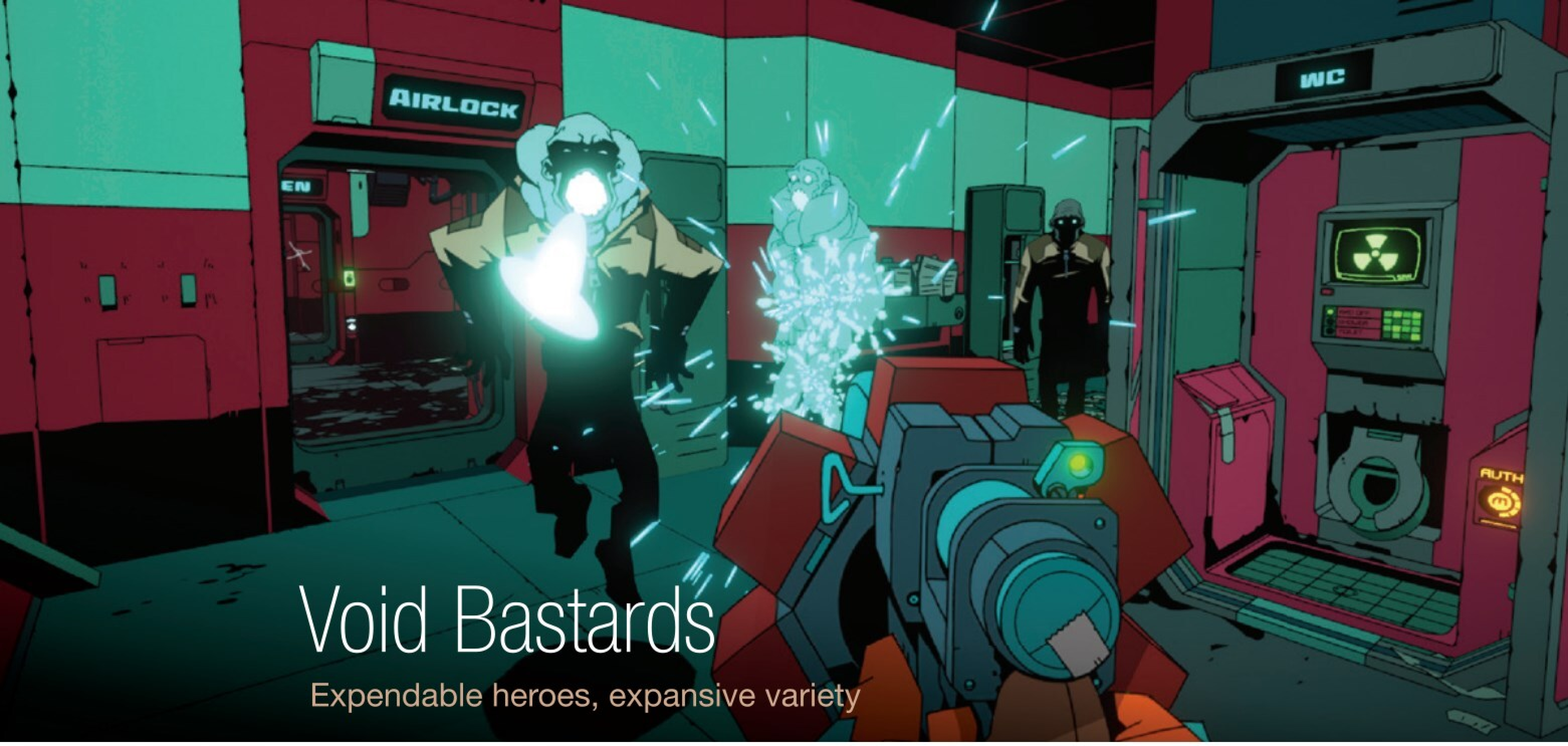
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
No Matter Studios

» **Developer**
No Matter Studios

» **Release**
TBD



Void Bastards

Expendable heroes, expansive variety

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player
Shooter/Strategy

» Publisher
Humble Bundle

» Developer
Blue Manchu

» Release
Spring

Describing a hybrid game like Void Bastards is difficult, because though it takes inspiration from many familiar touchstones, no single one really captures the essence of the experience. Even so, if you picture the game that hangs suspended between System Shock 2, XCOM, and Rogue Legacy, you might get a rough idea of what to expect from this unconventional strategy shooter.

You control a dangerous prisoner who has been reconstituted by an A.I. in order to salvage materials from a sector of space filled with derelict ships. You explore high-tech vessels in first person, armed with various guns and devices to help you stay alive and find what you need. If you fail, your prisoner dies and you start over with another who has a different set of traits. But if you succeed, your prisoner may finally be able to craft a new piece of useful technology that makes the next excursion go even better – assuming you can deftly navigate a map filled with pirates, void whales, and other hazards while keeping an eye on your resources.

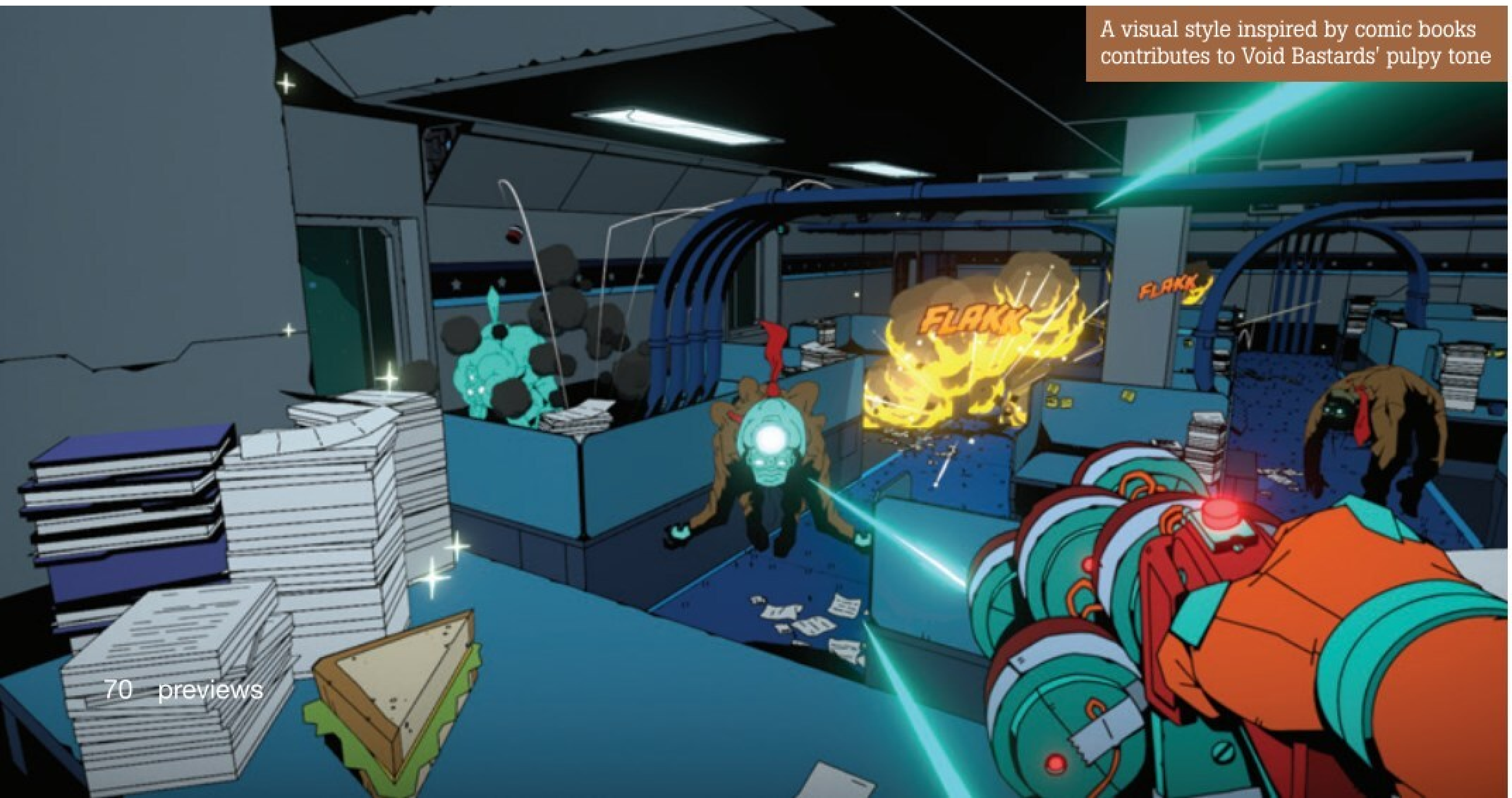
"We didn't start out with the idea that this would be a roguelike game," says Void Bastards game designer Jon Chey. "In fact, we don't even really talk about it as a roguelike. Obviously, it has elements of roguelike games, but we always envisaged this as a System Shock-style game, where there was a continuous story you would play through, and you would start at the beginning and end at the end."

Chey is in a unique position of expertise when it comes to making a System Shock-style game; he was one of the co-founders of Irrational Games and the project manager on System Shock 2. One of the goals of Void Bastards is to iterate on and hybridize that classic gameplay formula, with fun first-person shooting, ship exploration, and threats around every corner. This happens within a more freeform structure than many modern shooters; your goal may be to craft a specific item, but you won't get objective markers pointing you toward all of the required components. Instead, players explore the procedurally generated ships and look at their layouts to figure out the likelihood of finding a valuable score.

You may board a ship that has exactly what you want – but it may also have tough enemies, or frequent power outages, or corridors filled with radiation. Maybe you just want to make a dash for the items without firing a single bullet. Or, if it's all more than you can handle, you can return to the map and attempt to find the materials you need on a more welcoming ship. That's not chickening out; Void Bastards supports and encourages this kind of risk assessment. "The process of deciding what you are able and want to do in any given level, I think, is the most interesting thing about the game," Chey says. "It's what makes the game feel different."

While most of the action takes place in first-person, the strategic map is also important, because your success there can impact your chances when you board a ship. "It's not just a mission selection screen," Chey says. "There are different kinds of events that can happen there. Other entities are moving around on the map, some of which you want to run into, and some you want to avoid. You're juggling your resources, making decisions about how to get to your goal, which path to take."

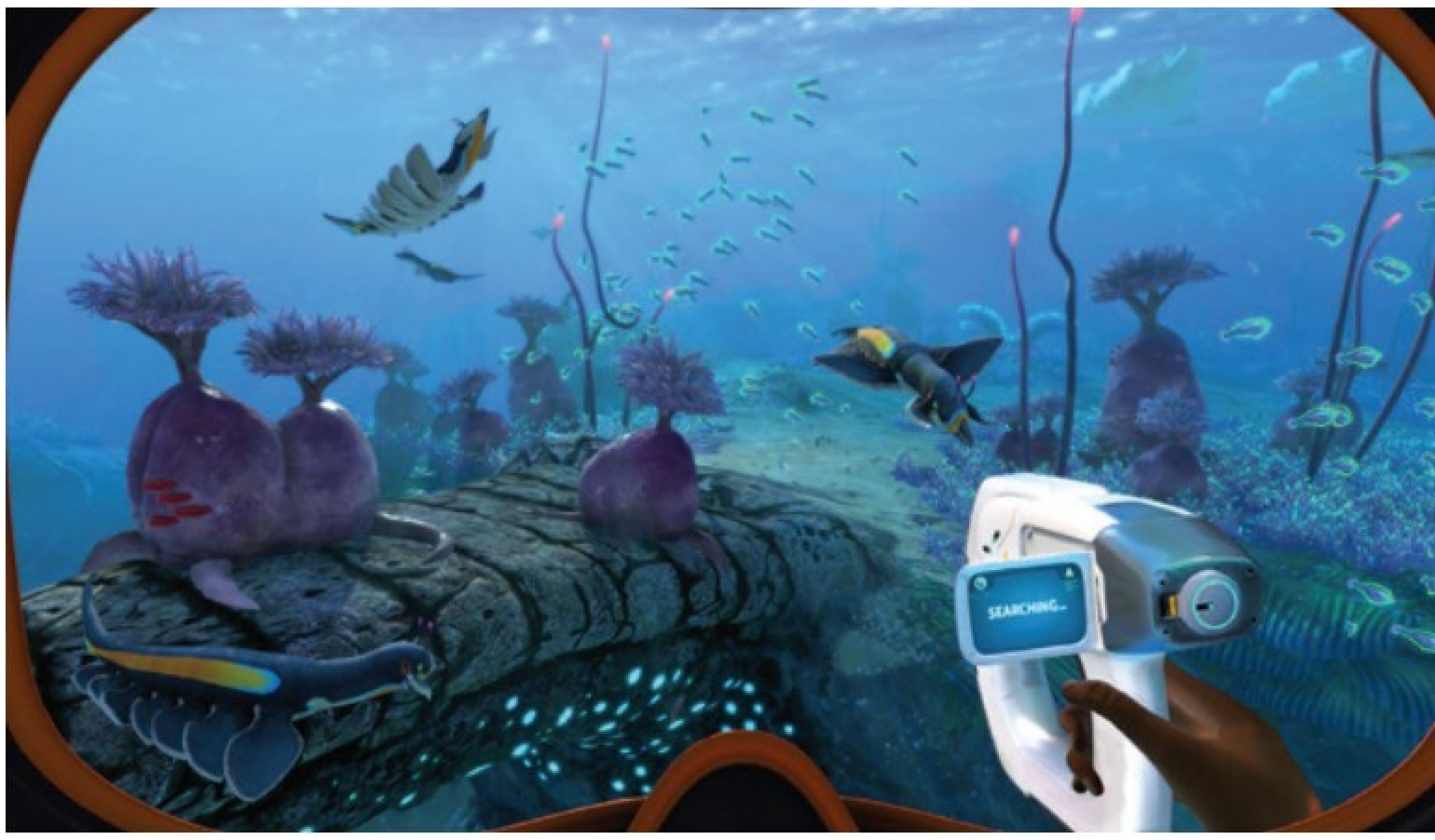
All of these gameplay layers are wrapped in stylish comic-book visuals, along with a humorous tone influenced by irreverent science fiction (like the writing of Douglas Adams). As a whole, Void Bastards may be unlike anything you've played before. But when it launches later this year, you're bound to recognize and enjoy some part of its unique blend of inspirations. » **Joe Juba**



A visual style inspired by comic books contributes to Void Bastards' pulpy tone

Subnautica: Below Zero

Deep sea survival's frozen future



Subnautica offered players a seductive survival experience, a story mired in mystery that begins with scrambling for oxygen tanks and sea skimmers and ends with deep sea navigation and submarines. The upcoming standalone expansion, Below Zero, offers players a new curated survival journey through frozen depths, with new biomes, monstrous entities, and creations to explore.

Much like the original game, you're the victim of a disaster that leaves you scavenging for supplies. You'll need to forage for sustenance, build shelter, and more as you expand your arsenal of traversal and survival tools. While you start out a bit safer and set up in this title, we don't know if that lasts as the game continues to be developed. The world is full of life, from adorable little creatures such as the penguin-like Penglings to giant leviathans that make exploring the depths majestic and terrifying. While we have only seen a few of the huge creatures beneath the ice at this point in Early Access, if the original game is anything to go on, pure terror and wondrous whales likely lurk beneath. Your journey includes some time above water as well, maneuvering icy ravines and precipices.

The strengths of the original game are all here – the mix of anxiety and excitement when delving into an underwater cave for the first time is a compelling feeling that hasn't been replicated in many games. Every errant noise coming out of the deep can send you scuttling back to the surface out of the great unsettling fear of the unknown, but constant development for the next tier of upgrades and enhancements pushes you forward to discover new areas and new secrets.

Keeping your eye on oxygen, food, and water while scavenging for new tech remains a compelling loop of advancement that keeps you ever testing the borders of your known explorations. Entering new waters for the first time is always fun, as well as the first time you see a large silhouette in the water slowly moving toward you – is it neutral? Is it going to eat me? Scooping up fish, scanning everything you encounter, and creating many of your starting survival staples feels very similar to the original Subnautica (many of the items are the same), but the biome diversity is a strong showing, even in this early access form, of beautiful and strange scenery as you move from your base to deeper waters. Each significant upgrade, whether it's oxygen tanks or flippers, lets you delve a bit farther and a bit deeper from sanctuary and safety.

If you want to get started in the frozen wastes today, Below Zero is available in early access on Steam, but we have a ways to go before the final game with all of its content is ready. When this comes out of the freezer, I can't wait to get my feet wet all over again in the deep dark below. » **Daniel Tack**

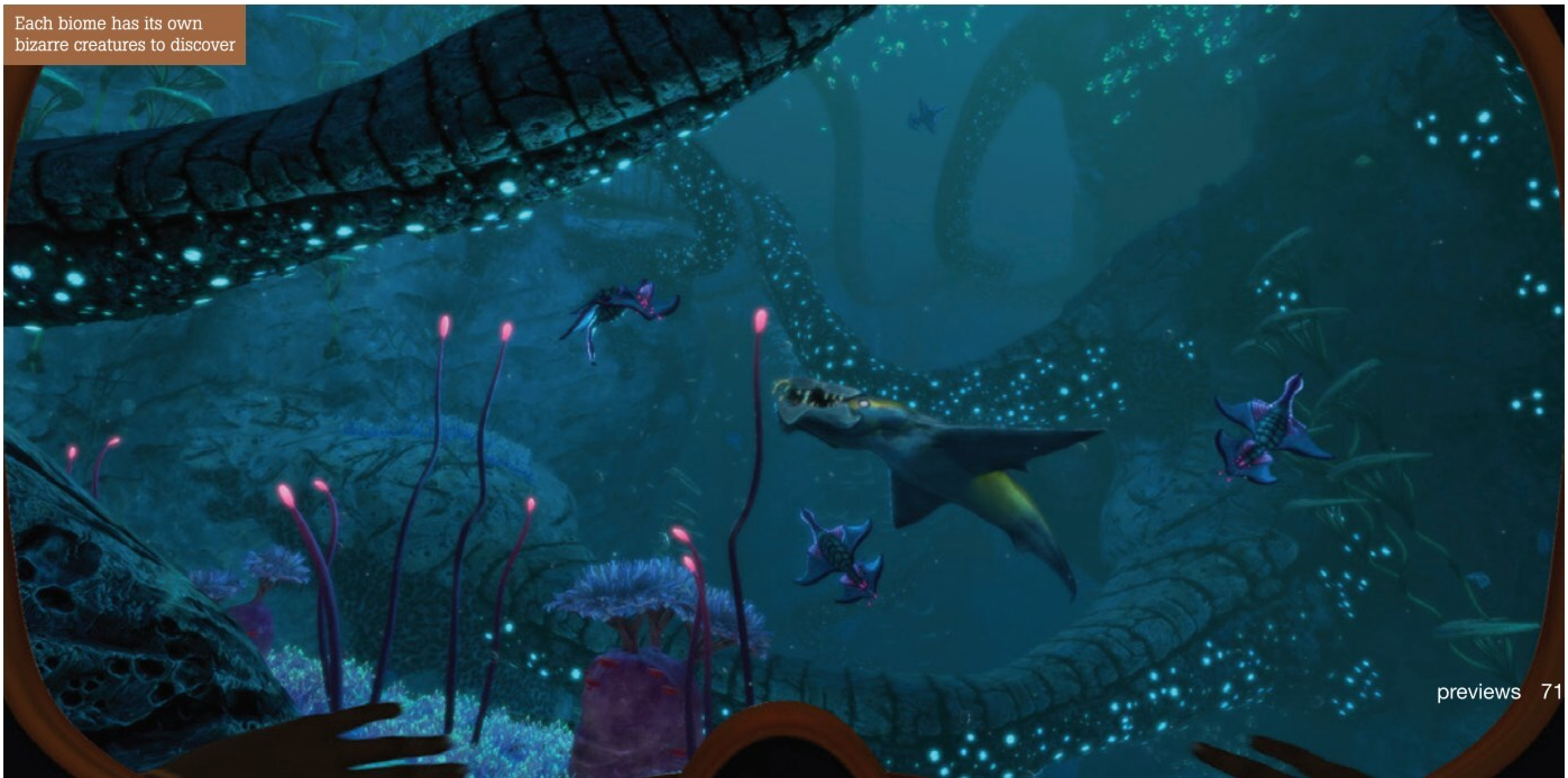
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Unknown Worlds Entertainment

» **Developer**
Unknown Worlds Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA



Each biome has its own bizarre creatures to discover

Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain

A different take on the bug-battling oddity

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
D3 Publisher

» Developer
Yuke's

» Release
April 11

Wait a second, didn't EDF 5 just come out? That bug-blasting game may have hit North America last December, but by that point it had already been available in Japan for nearly a year. And now, a new invasion is about to begin. Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain is a significant shift from its predecessors, in more ways than its simultaneous worldwide release.

Iron Rain is a spinoff of the numbered series, in much the same way as 2011's Insect Armageddon. Yuke's is putting its own spin on the core gameplay, most notably in its (slightly) darker tone and revamped weapons and class system. Series producer Nobuyuki Okajima sees Iron Rain as a chance to reexamine the series and hopefully appeal more to Western fans.

"Sometimes when you see a rock band and they're really good while they're indie, when they become major they start to lose those touches and sounds a little bit," Okajima says. "I'm trying to transform the traditional EDF to a more universal style, but there's a fear that comes from within that, just like those bands, we'll start losing those elements and features that core fans like. I don't want to do that, so that's why I decided to keep the two styles separate."

Make no mistake: The dialogue is corny and you're still fighting giant bugs and robots, but the performances don't seem as amateurish as they have in earlier entries. There's a welcome attempt at playful banter between squadmates, which leans into the idea that your group has spent some serious time together and cracked though its share of carapaces.

"To be clear, I am the biggest and number one EDF fan," Okajima says. "I don't want to lose or change the good features that EDF has."

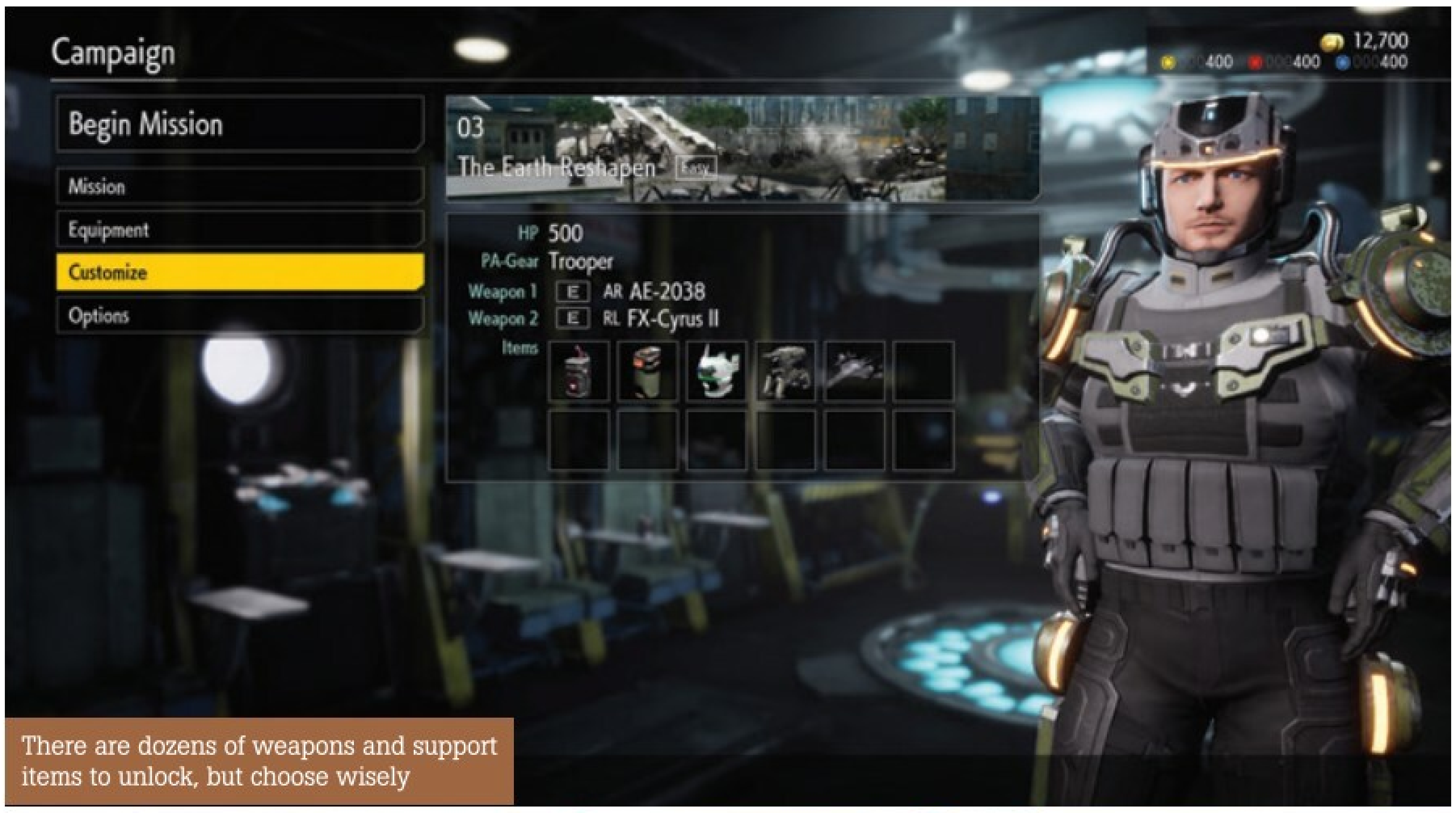
Perhaps the most notable tweak is how you earn new weapons. In the past, you picked up crates that defeated foes inexplicably dropped. Now, they drop resource gems when you blast them into smithereens. Between stages, you can then craft new weapons using those gems, based on blueprints that randomly open up via level completion. Gating higher-tier weapons behind expensive resource costs keeps things slightly more balanced, and it led me to rely more on level-appropriate gear during my hands-on time. I don't know how it fares over the long run, but what I played felt a bit more difficult overall.

I usually pick the generalist Trooper class or its equivalent, but Iron Rain has me second-guessing that tradition. A new Prowl Rider class is a remarkable addition, adding the mobility of a grappling hook with the new ability to control tamed bugs on the battlefield. You can take command of an ant, spider, scorpion, and more, giving enemies a taste of their own claw-flavored medicine. I particularly liked using the grapple to zoom into enemies and then unleash a powerful sword attack.

If you like the idea of swords, but would prefer playing as a more armored Heavy Striker or the high-flying Jet Lifter, you can do that. Weapons aren't locked to classes in Iron Rain, so you can bring as much of whatever as you want, provided you have the carrying capacity. A surprisingly deep character customizer helps add even more flexibility to the action, including unlockable cosmetics.

Iron Rain looks like a great pick for players who have been curious about the series but haven't had a chance to dive in. If the giant bugs are a sticking point, Okajima understands. "I always get the reaction, 'I'm not comfortable with insects, and I don't want to see them.' I tell them, 'That's exactly why I want you to play! You get to kill them all with missiles and guns!'" » **Jeff Cork**

Iron Rain takes place in North America, including a few recognizable cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles



03
The Earth Reshapen Easy

HP 500
PA-Gear Trooper
Weapon 1 E AR AE-2038
Weapon 2 E RL FX-Cyrus II
Items

There are dozens of weapons and support items to unlock, but choose wisely

Big bugs mean big messes

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Judgment

From Yakuza to ace detective

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Sega

» **Release**
Summer

Takayuki Yagami, the protagonist of the Yakuza studio's upcoming spinoff game Judgment, isn't Kazuma Kiryu. He's not an infamous ex-gangster everyone fears, and while he can put up a fight on the streets of Kamurocho, his leather jacket, jeans, and pocket chain don't exactly command respect. But as I played a two-hour chunk of Judgment, it became clear Takayuki is retracing many of Kiryu's steps, though not without making a few detours.

If you're familiar with the Yakuza series, you're most of the way there on Judgment. My demo had me running from waypoints around Kamurocho to see the next few cutscenes, though I could stop for a burger at the Wild Jackson on the way if I wanted, or get in fights with street punks using one of two fighting styles (Crane for groups, Tiger for lone targets).

The context for all the back-and-forth is wildly different, however. Takayuki is an ex-lawyer turned private eye, which means taking a more thorough approach to uncovering the mystery that inevitably springs up. His former firm has hired him to help investigate the murder of a Kyorei Clan crony, which his client, Captain of the Tojo-clan Matsugane family Kyohei Hamura, is suspected of having committed. Even in these early scenes I got a great sense of the friendly-but-estranged relationship Takayuki has with his former co-workers, and there were some fun scenes that played off their chemistry.

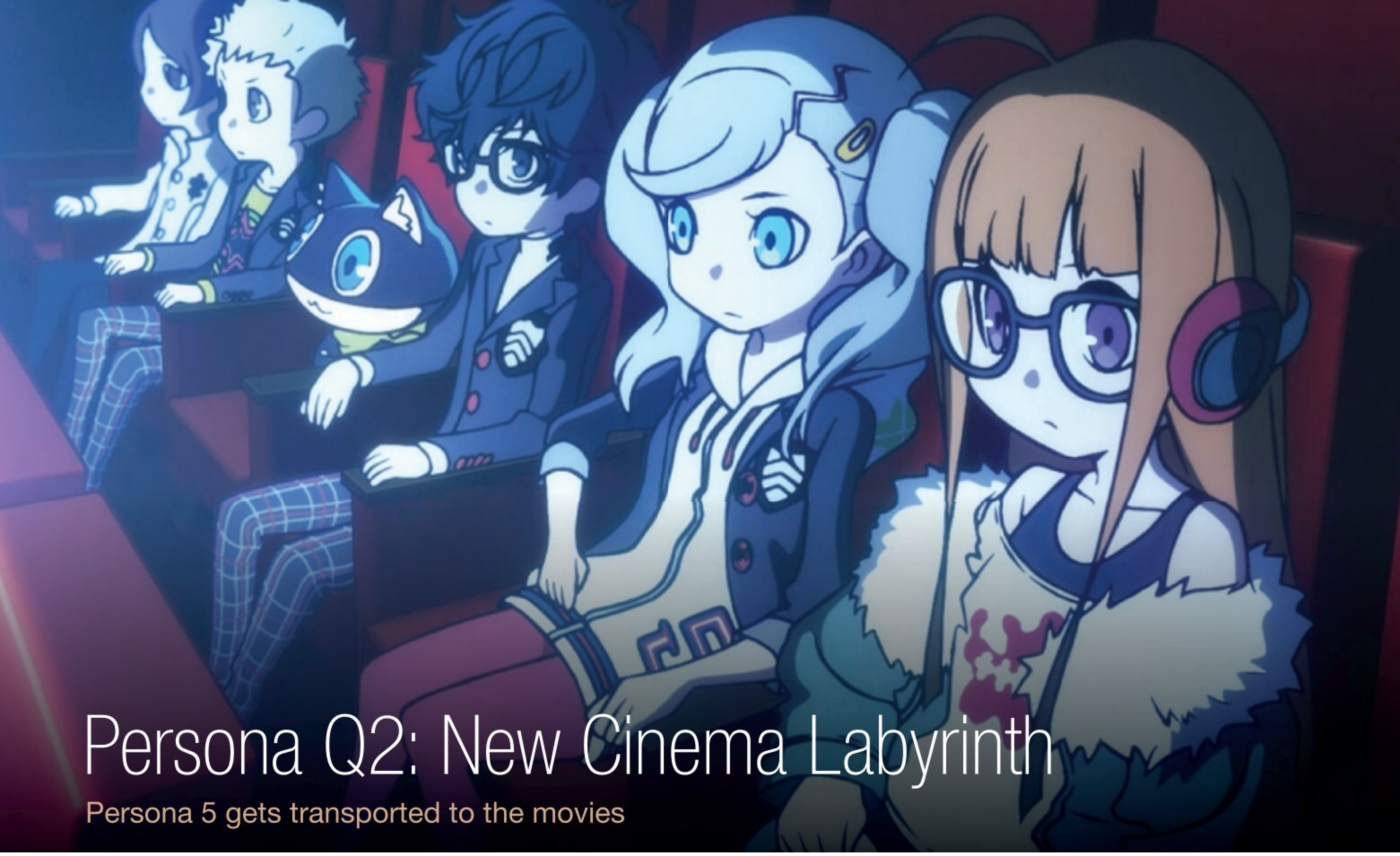
Takayuki is also more prone to legwork than Kiryu, which means a more codified system for tailing targets, first-person investigative sequences in which you scan an area for clues, and conversation trees that net you bonus experience for asking the more pertinent questions first. Takayuki can also frequent certain hangout spots to get chummy with Kamurocho residents to pick up on clues or potential side quests, but I wasn't able to get any of these threads going in my demo. While the tailing segment wasn't terribly exciting, the rest helped cement Judgment as a more methodical game, even if the differences weren't major.

The build I played featured one major difference that will likely split the series' fanbase: English voice acting. The series has its dubious brushes with dubbing in the past (the original Yakuza featured a star-studded cast that failed to capture the Japanese cast's vigor), but Judgment looks to fare better. Recent Yakuza games have featured some strong localization and that's also the case here, which helps the lines voice actors deliver feel natural. Greg Chun in particular does a great job of characterizing Takayuki.

The team has even done additional lip-syncing for the English dub; it's not perfect, but it did help me suspend my disbelief at a cast of Japanese characters all speaking English. That said, I'm still personally inclined to go with the original voice track, since it feels more authentic and the incidental dialogue from passerby as you wander Kamurocho is still in Japanese.

Judgment looks to be a new Yakuza game pulling on different threads, which is more or less what I was hoping for. Its new perspective on the series' world of organized crime was fresh enough, and the new characters were endearing enough, to keep me hooked in. It might not bring in people turned off by previous games, but for those looking for a place to start, Judgment should be on their radar.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth

Persona 5 gets transported to the movies

Back in 2014, Atlus fused its popular Persona and Etrian Odyssey franchises to much fanfare. In many ways, it was a great match, providing the maddening challenge of an Etrian Odyssey adventure alongside the fun character moments and hip, themed dungeons of Persona. Now Atlus is back with an entry starring the Persona 5 cast, and this time they'll visit movie-themed dungeons across various film genres.

The narrative is centered on the Persona 5 cast, so you won't choose a particular perspective like in the previous game. As you play, the cast expands to 28 characters, including those from Persona 3, Persona 4, and original allies created specifically for Persona Q2. Due to fan demand, Atlus added the female protagonist from Persona 3 Portable alongside her male counterpart, and it's being teased she has a big role in the overall plot. Expect plenty of other familiar faces, from lively mascot Teddie to loveable goofball Junpei Iori. Persona Q2 has a bigger emphasis on character bonds, which Atlus hopes makes players form a deeper connection to the experience. For those worried, the storyline is completely stand-alone, so you don't need to have played Persona 5 or the previous Persona Q to enjoy it.

The Persona series is known for its fun themes, and this game goes out with one big focus: movies. Expect to see popcorn and film reels to sell the experience, and the labyrinths you dungeon crawl and map your way through all have their own unique setup. For instance, there's a dungeon that's an homage to *Jurassic Park* with dinosaurs running amok in a theme park. As you confront enemies, you still engage in turn-based battles and can perform All-Out-Attacks if you knock all your foes down by exploiting their elemental weaknesses. Unison abilities also allow you to pair characters together, creating cool ways to best baddies.

Due to the game launching late in the 3DS lifecycle, Atlus isn't offering dubbed voice-overs, but it's great that fans still have a chance to experience the game. If Persona Q2 is as good as its predecessor, it'll be worth the sacrifice, and the 3DS is sure to go out on a high note. » **Kimberley Wallace**

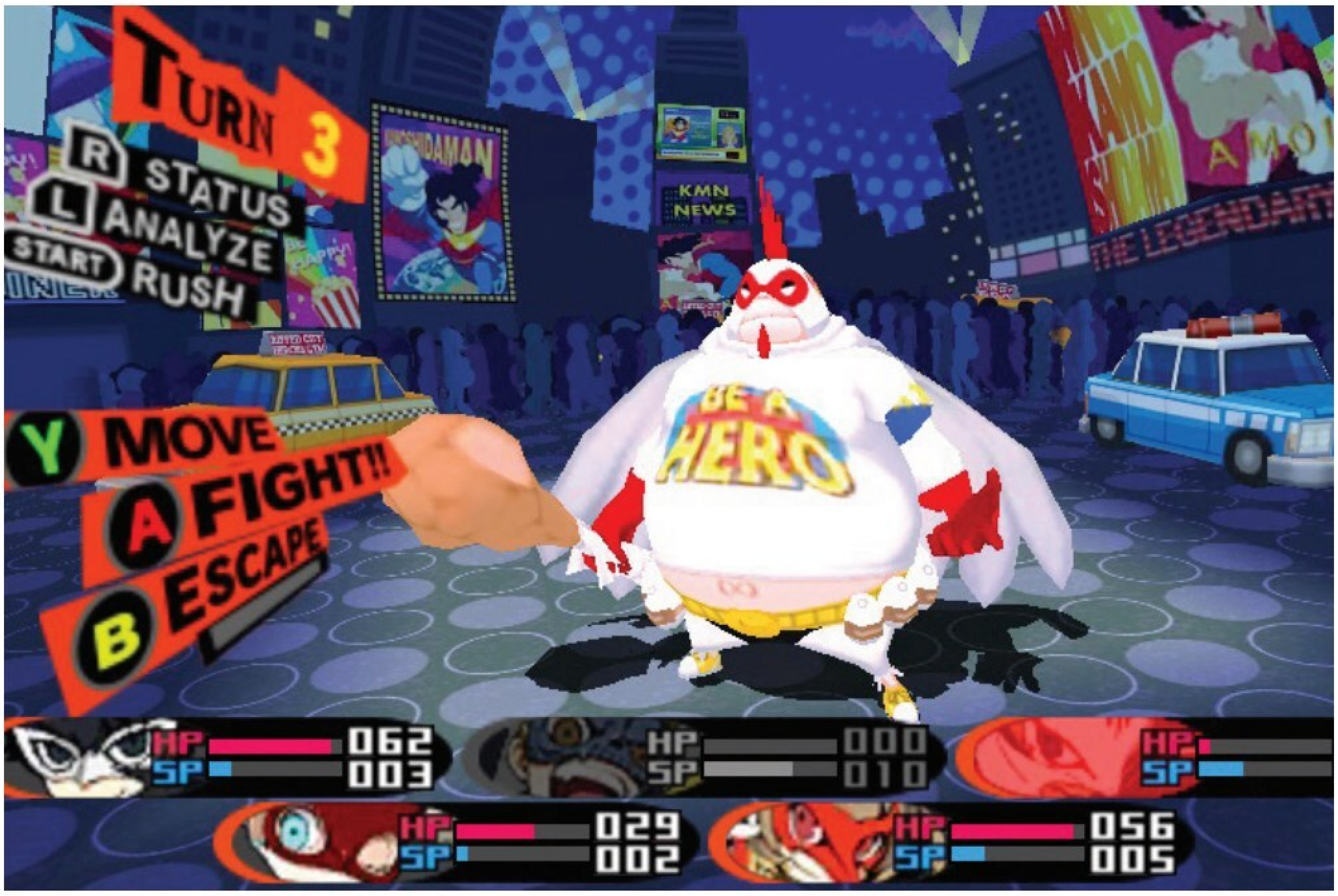
» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Atlus

» **Release**
June 4



New World

Creating a life in a brand-new land

» Platform
PC

» Style
MMORPG

» Publisher
Amazon Game Studios

» Developer
Amazon Game Studios

» Release
2019

Imagine yourself on a months-long boat journey, departing from Europe across the ocean with nothing to your name except the clothes on your back. Eventually, your 17th-century ship lands on a sandy beach with the infinite potential of an unexplored world ahead. You are a settler in an unnamed and uncharted New World, the first wave of exploration of an untamed island to build settlements, build character, and build a life.

New World has been in the works at Amazon Game Studios for over three years, hoping to leverage Amazon's immense bank of servers to create a truly persistent MMORPG. New World asks players to join one of many guilds on the island and essentially create a culture with a group of other people through shared experiences. The guild's goal is to conquer the entire new world through skirmishes and takeovers, slowly uncovering and laying claim to both undiscovered land and enemy-controlled territory.

Using the servers at Amazon's disposal allows New World to create a number of game worlds, granting every instance its own guilds, people, and borders. When guilds declare war on each other, a time is set where their defending fort is left vulnerable to attack, giving both guilds time to prepare for the inevitable incursion. The holders of the fort patrol along the building walls while the attacking army lines up explosives along the wall until they can blast their way in.

After declaring war, our guild sat in the marshes outside the enemy fort, being told to stay low and stay quiet before any guards catch wind of us. In the ensuing skirmish, I ran around the fort using my healing glaive to help everyone else before accidentally ending up in a dramatic showdown with an enemy soldier on the wooden pathways above. It felt like the ending to a movie about pirates until my opponent ran his sword through me and forced me to respawn.

War isn't the only way you can change the landscape of New World. Planting a tree will create an enduring mark on the world, while planting a hundred trees creates a forest that transforms the region. Guilds can build settlements, create fields of crops around them, and then possibly lose it all to an aggressive enemy guild eager to take all of that for themselves.

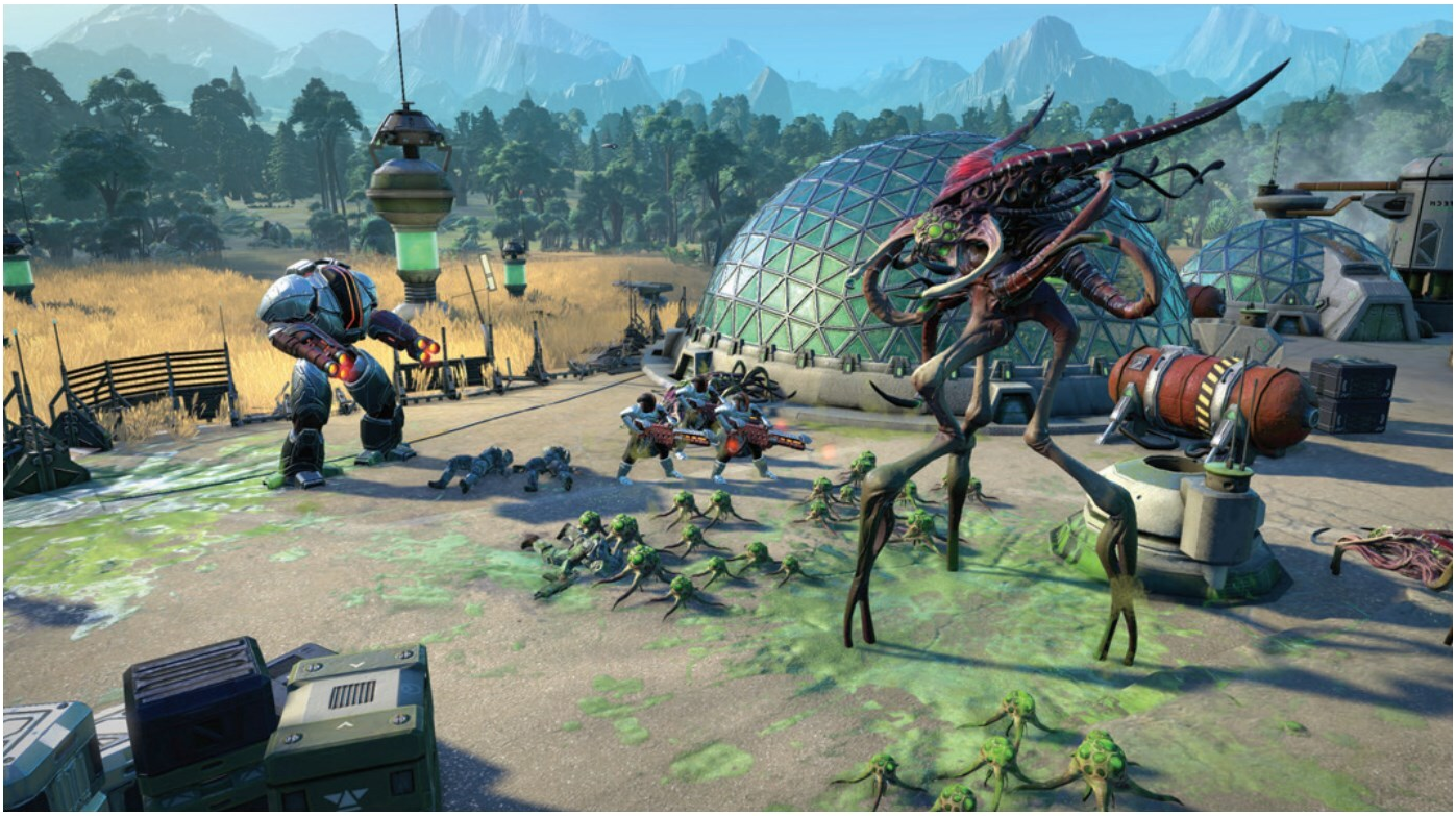
Players have a more direct hand on the action with New World, making every swing of the sword or shot of the gun a deliberate operation. The combat feels more contemporary than some other elements of the game, like a classic map of period-appropriate cartography than it will a modern MMORPG map.

After years in development, New World still has a lot to prove in the MMORPG space. Players can live in its world and get lost in their roles, creating a culture within their worlds and guilds. If New World can be compelling enough for players to live that second life, Amazon Game Studios may have a hit on its hands.

» Imran Khan

Age Of Wonders: Planetfall

Streamlined sci-fi strategy



The once-dominant 4X genre has experienced a resurgence on PC in the last five years, and Age of Wonders: Planetfall captures the essence of the genre with an accessible entrance that doesn't skimp on the strategy elements. Nestled somewhere comfortably between the Civilization and Heroes of Might and Magic franchises, the Wonders series branches out to space with intriguing results.

During a preview session, I played as one of three races (there are three more planned for release). These races all stem from the same core civilization, but have diverged dramatically development-wise in a post-apocalyptic reality. The military-minded Vanguard are the most "human" of these, with assault rifles, space-suits, and mechanized support. The Kirko are an insectoid race, former slaves seeking to rule. Finally, there's the race I chose to play as – The Amazon, an all-female race of bioengineers that relies on use of alien beasts, including dinosaurs, as mounts and companions in combat.

Anyone familiar with other 4X games should be right at home with Age of Wonders: Planetfall's mechanics. Starting with a base of operations, I upgrade and expand quickly, leading to new cities that can be developed and produce units. Other expansions simply provide resources for my rapidly-growing tech trees and military pursuits. By creating my starting hero with some debuff characteristics that make it weaker in some areas, I'm allowed more starting points to customize my hero exactly as I wish, including a perk that allows me to start mounted on a monstrous dinosaur – great for giving me an edge in early game skirmishes and raids. By taking over more areas and annexing them to my core colonies, the resources start rolling in as I encounter enemies and begin diplomacy.

You can win a game of AoW: Planetfall in the standard fashion by eliminating all your opponents, but that can be a daunting task on large maps with so much area to hold and conquer. Alternate paths to victory abound, including a tech path for each race that gives you access to potent powers that enemies will find almost impossible to recover from, things like a xenoplague that alters all life in your favor or weapons of mass destruction to annihilate everything in sight. Don't feel like a hostile takeover? Uniting the world is also a viable route to victory, if you can maintain friendships with other factions.

I don't get off to a peaceful start, and begin rapid expansion around my starting territories, creating multiple new colonies and annexes, declaring war on my neighbors, and leveraging my military research to create hulking beasts that stomp my opponents into the ground. Combat is a tactical turn-based affair (which you can auto resolve, especially useful when dealing with non-faction raiding marauders or inconsequential road bumps on the map) that allows you full control of your armies. Every unit has a host of individual upgrades that keep even your lower-tier units relevant into the endgame as you modify them. Hero units offer even more customization, as they acquire skill points and find new weapons and items over the course of a game. When you dial into combat, cover and other special attacks like grenades or overwatch are highly relevant toward keeping your army healthy and kicking.

In the end, my hostilities caught up to me and I was unable to hold onto the spread-thin exterior of my empire as other factions united to assault me. NPC marauders took advantage of my occupied fighting forces to strip away many of my auxiliary resources. I was close to executing a xenoplague that would have assuredly swung the match in my favor, but just didn't make it. The Amazons fell, but the battle whet my appetite for more.

Age of Wonders: Planetfall is scheduled to hit this year, and I'm looking forward to playing with more bioengineered space dinosaurs when that happens. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Paradox Interactive

» **Developer**
Triumph Studios

» **Release**
2019

Observation

There's something in the pod bay

» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Devolver Digital

» **Developer**
No Code

» **Release**
2019

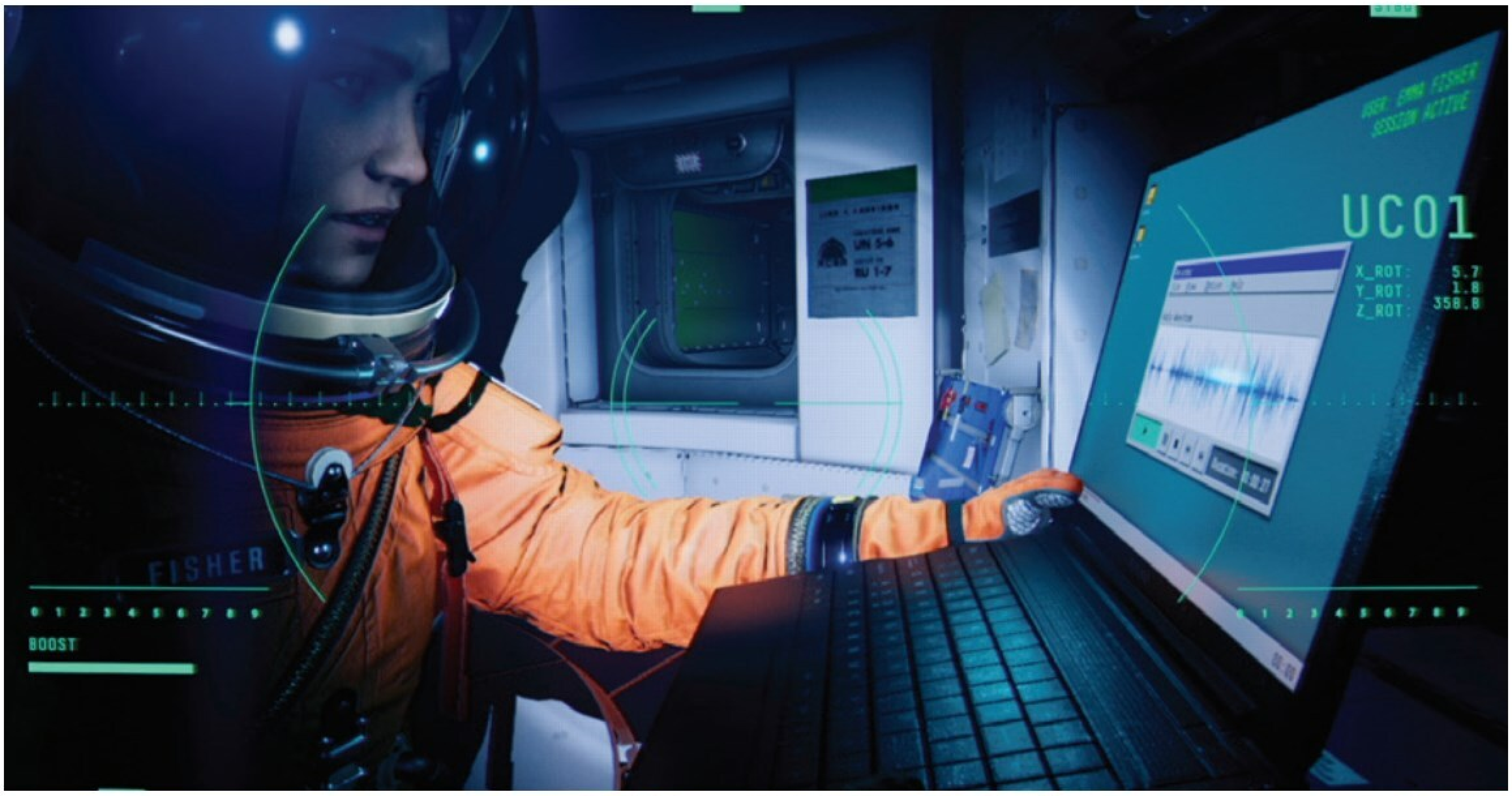
Scottish developer No Code made its name back in 2017 with the strange but alluring Stories Untold, an adventure game that combined '80s nostalgia and horror to great effect. Now No Code is back with Observation, which appears to be a bizarre combination of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Five Nights at Freddy's. "Observation is about a space-station A.I. becoming seemingly self-aware, just as a disaster strikes the station and its crew," explains creative director Jon McKellan. "It follows the survival of crew member Emma Fisher, but through the lens of the station cameras and systems."

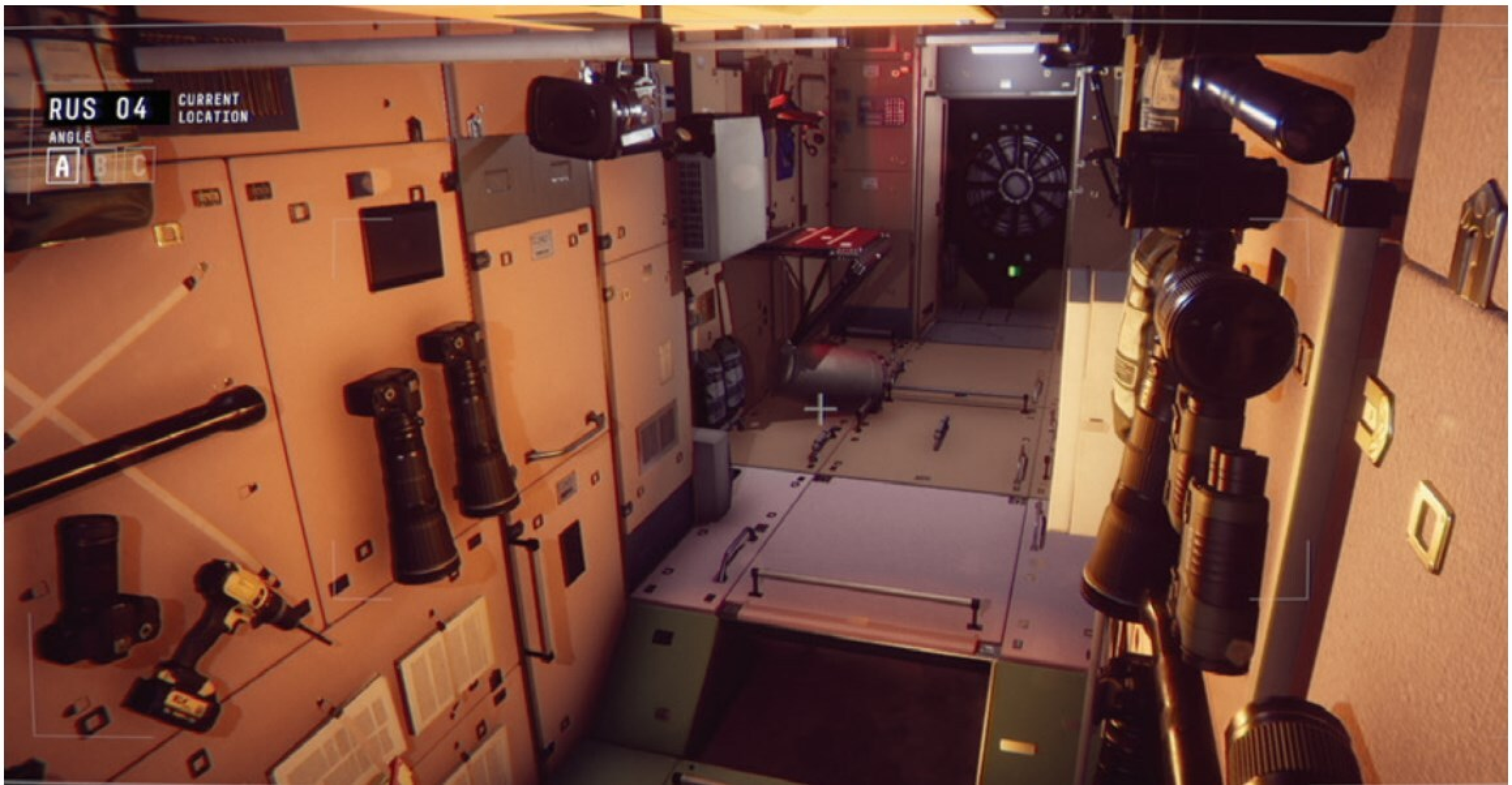
Space stations are nothing new for No Code, whose founding members worked on Alien: Isolation, nor is the developer's fondness for putting the player in fascinating roles. "The player is not on the station, they *are* the station," McKellan says. "You can be anywhere, immediately, and interact with things in ways the human crew cannot. Like Stories Untold, it's puzzles at its heart, but in our own way. It's not about head-scratching complicated solutions, more about using your initiative, exploring the setup, and discovering what the puzzle is in the first place."

One of the most interesting qualities of Stories Untold was its habit of mixing genres and refusing to give the player any easy answers. In one segment, you'd be exploring an arctic military base in first-person before shortly finding yourself navigating a text adventure that required you to listen to in-game radio frequencies while referring to a Morse code chart to find solutions. According to No Code, Observation will be a similar experience when it comes to its puzzles, bouncing between a few styles of play.

So many horror movies and games are built on the idea of a monstrous A.I. terrorizing human victims that the novelty of playing an A.I. in that situation is intriguing, especially since No Code hasn't specified whether or not the A.I. (named SAM) is siding with or against survivor Emma. "What has happened to the station, its crew, and what is happening to SAM – these are the questions posed to the player right from the start, and the game will have them explore that and find out the truth at the center of it all," McKellan says.

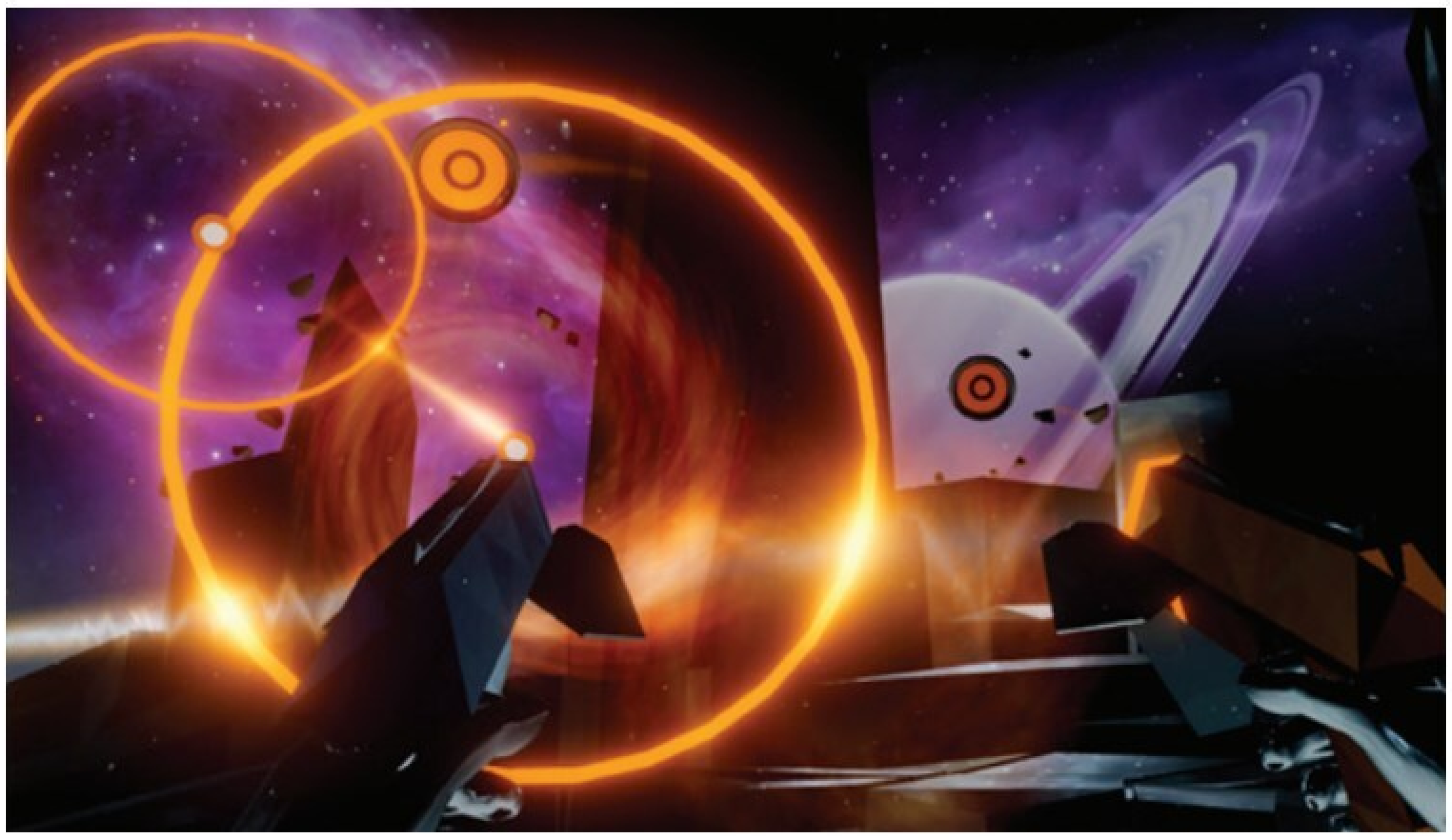
To create Observation, No Code has increased its studio size from 3 to 11 full-time developers, and the progress we've seen so far suggests that this will be a devilishly clever adventure. We cannot wait to come aboard this spooky station when Observation hits later this year. » **Javy Gwaltney**





Audica

The creators of Rock Band take a shot at VR



Harmonix has a long history of helping shape the rhythm and music genre. As the original creators of games like Frequency, Guitar Hero, Rock Band, Dance Central, and Karaoke Revolution, the studio has virtually defined our modern understanding of interactive music play. In 2019, the studio is embracing the nascent potential of the growing VR platforms; Audica is a hybrid of beat matching, choreographed movement, and high-intensity shooting, and it only takes a few minutes of play to recognize its enormous potential.

Much of the fun comes from nailing targets as they come flying toward you out of the darkness, almost like skeet shooting in reverse. On lower difficulties, it's simply about sighting down the blue and orange circles and tapping the trigger on the correctly colored gun in your hand as a concentric circle closes around the target, in time with the beat. As the difficulty escalates, the targets come faster, from more directions, and with new shapes that demand additional tweaks to your firing pattern. Diamonds require a sustained trigger hold. Other notes must be bashed with a pistol-whipping melee. Some targets require that you hold the controller on its side.

"I very much wanted to make a shooting game, but I don't actually like real-world guns and violence," says Alex Rigopulos, co-founder of Harmonix and creative director on the game. "I wanted to make a game that was focused on the kind of mechanical bliss of gaming and shooting rhythmically, without the real-world baggage that goes along with guns."

The sci-fi vibe is apparent from the outset, and furthered by the great electronic music soundtrack on offer. "The character we were going for is electronic music that had very crisp, glistening, modern production that matched the aesthetic vibe of the game, and matched the futuristic setting, as well as the sweeping, epic feel we're trying to summon through the gameplay," Rigopulos says. While playing, those selection criteria shine through in the music, as pronounced beats and shifting rhythms lead to highly physical and novel routines. Your laser blasts are timed up with kick drums, snares, and pitched sounds, and the music dims and darkens when you make mistakes. Get in the flow of an unbroken streak, and the sound swells in response.

The burgeoning VR scene has already seen some successful music games, but Audica has a complexity and depth that should be welcomed by longtime aficionados. Harmonix deserves its reputation for great rhythmic gameplay, and its ear for music picks is unmatched. As I played Audica and slowly ramped up the difficulty on different songs, I could feel myself getting caught up in the music, reminding me of how much energy I've invested in the studio's games over the years. "The beauty of music gameplay, when done right, is that it can really amplify the emotional power that is already locked inside music," Rigopulos says. "And that's at the core of everything we try to do across all of our projects."

» **Matt Miller**

» Platform
Rift • Vive

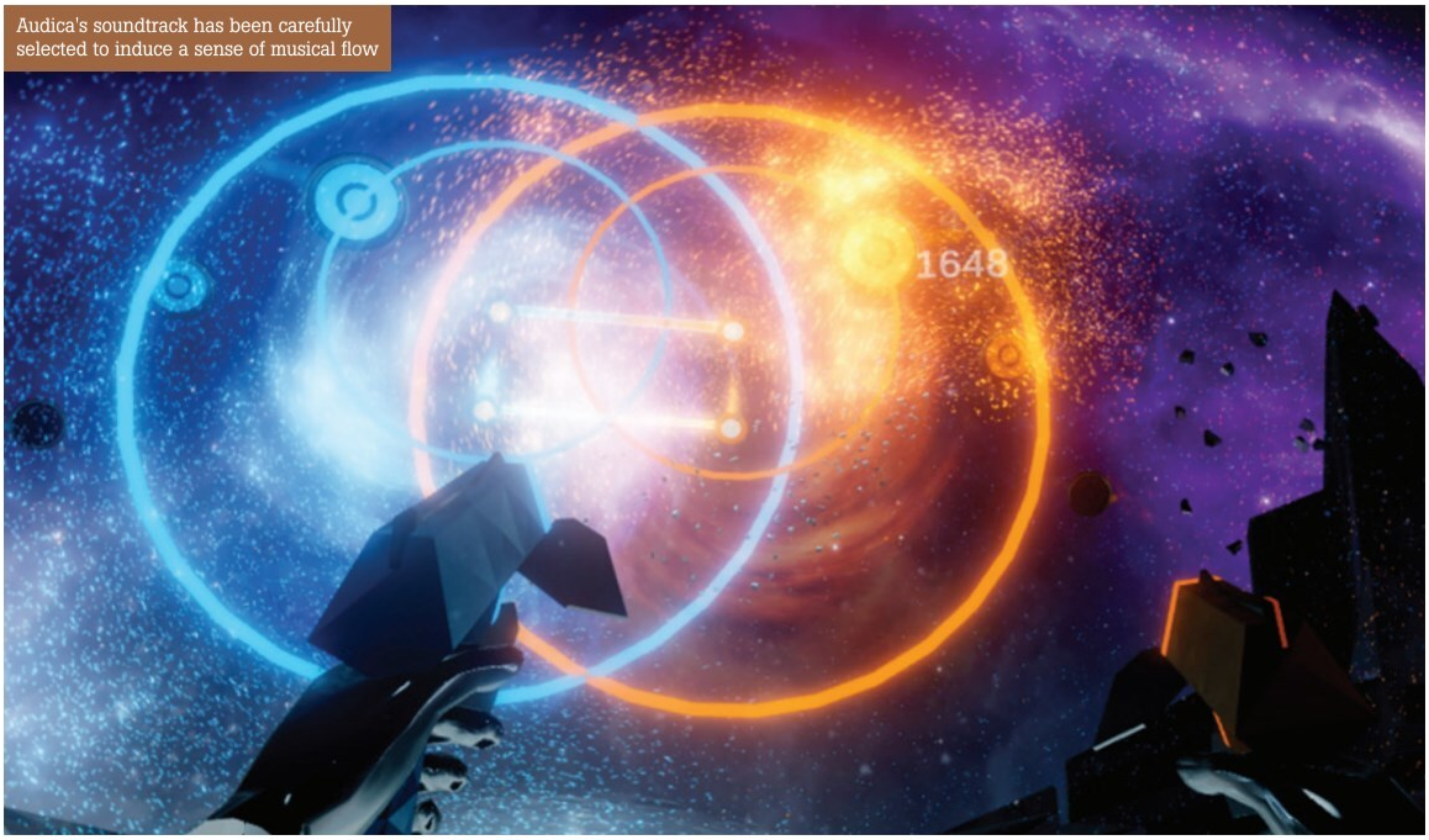
» Style
1-Player Rhythm/Shooter

» Publisher
Harmonix

» Developer
Harmonix

» Release
2019

Audica's soundtrack has been carefully selected to induce a sense of musical flow



A Growing Setlist

Audica focuses on a wide array of electronic music, and the first few announced tracks offer a good picture of the vibe Harmonix is shooting for. "The Audica soundtrack includes everything from household names and world-class electronic artists to electronic artists that many people may have never heard of, but that are just incredible hidden gems," says Alex Rigopulos, co-founder of Harmonix and creative director on the game. "We want to introduce the world to some of these amazing electronic artists through the gameplay and the soundtrack."

The early access version (launching March 7) includes 10 songs. As of this writing, five of those tracks have been revealed:

- 788-L & Blanke "Destiny"
- Alison Wonderland "I Want U"
- Donna Summer "I Feel Love (Afrojack Remix)"
- James Egbert "The Space"
- Savant "Splinter"

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

82 Apex Legends

Respawn's Apex Legends launched out of nowhere to instantly become a contender for the battle royale crown. Tossing special abilities into the mix with rock-solid shooting and amazing communication tools, Apex Legends has everything it needs to become a genre leader.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	You, if you abandon your jump party.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Far Cry New Dawn

A paint-by-numbers sequel

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** February 15 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Return to Far Cry 5's Hope County decades after a nuclear holocaust has transformed the world

» **Graphics**
New Dawn adds plenty of hot pink to the landscape, but the post-apocalyptic motif is still well-trodden territory

» **Sound**
Save from your silent protagonist, New Dawn's cast turns in solid voice performances

» **Playability**
Far Cry's core mix of stealthy sniping and run-and-gun action hasn't changed much over the years, for better and worse

» **Entertainment**
Superficial shakeups leave New Dawn feeling familiar to a fault for longtime Far Cry fans, but the gunplay is still satisfying

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Far Cry fans are no strangers to visiting exotic locales, but New Dawn's vibrant post-apocalyptic setting promised to introduce some drastic changes to the aging series. While the neon-hued flora and mutated fauna successfully shake up the landscape, the superficial progression changes and formulaic story do little to accentuate this new coat of paint.

If you're a longtime fan who is simply looking for more Far Cry, let me save you some time: New Dawn delivers all of the enemy-laden outposts, gory stealth kills, manic co-op, and compulsive item-collecting you're used to, and the gunplay is still rock-solid. This entry is still fun, but if you're looking for a game that moves the formula forward in interesting ways, New Dawn's changes rack up more misses than hits.

Set nearly two decades after the collapse of society prophesized by Far Cry 5 antagonist Joseph Seed, New Dawn focuses on a handful of survivors trying to rebuild a community in a makeshift base called Prosperity. Unfortunately, Prosperity's success quickly garners the unwanted attention of twin sisters Mickey and Lou, who control Hope County with an army of appropriately post-apocalyptic misfits. Your job, as a good Samaritan with impeccable marksman skills, is a familiar one: wrestle control of the region back, one outpost and side activity at a time.

Far Cry narratives have had their ups and downs over the years, but New Dawn's story just feels creatively bankrupt. Unlike previous Far Cry antagonists, Mickey and Lou are irredeemably one-dimensional, their Very Bad personalities hinging on a solitary anecdote from their childhoods. Their delivery is equally formulaic – you can expect the usual philosophical monologuing (though mercifully less frequent than Far Cry 5), the random displays of "shocking" violence in cutscenes, and the post-mission radio taunts that are never really explained how or why you're hearing them.

New Dawn's story missions also feel overly familiar, and at times downright perfunctory. The gunner-seat sequence, the hallucination sequence, the arena-fight sequence – they are all here, and provoke little more than a sense of déjà vu. Thankfully, the majority of your time is still spent exploring the world and taking down outposts, which remains a challenging and satisfying hook that propels the experience along, as do some memorable side missions. It is a testament to the series' strong backbone that even without a lot of new bells and whistles, I still enjoyed the majority of my time with New Dawn.

This was also true of one new addition to the familiar side activities, expeditions. These discrete side missions ferry you off to smaller locations to nab a bag of valuable resources. They are a solid addition to the Far Cry formula, and I appreciate the variety they offer. Both expeditions and outpost missions can now be reset at a higher difficulty level for more lucrative rewards. This introduces an intriguing push-your-luck element to replaying missions, but I wish the added challenge didn't just boil down to enemies with bigger HP bars and more shields.

New Dawn completely rejiggers the series' progression systems, but the changes end up being a wash. A new leveling system offers a few color-coded tiers of weapons and enemies, but the higher-level foes only sport more brawn, not brains – your best bet is still to pick them off with silenced shots or stealthy close-quarter takedowns. The new crafting system and base upgrades are a new way of serving up the same old unlocks: upgrade the garage to spawn new vehicles, upgrade the infirmary to increase your health, etc. The crafting system works fine, but the actual weapons and items you're crafting aren't particularly exciting.

All of the progression changes in New Dawn feel like they serve a dark master: microtransactions, which are front and center in the crafting menu. Need more components to upgrade a weapon? Buy a components pack! Can't wait to unlock that fancy new car? Buy it with Far Cry coins instead! You can even buy extra skill points with money. The in-game economy is more dystopian than anything you find in New Dawn's irradiated landscape, and even though you can see and do everything the game has to offer with time and patience, the continual reminders that you can skip the grind for a few more bucks just feels gross.

The core formula of this series holds up, but New Dawn struggles to make worthwhile contributions to it. Beyond the expedition missions, little about New Dawn actually feels new, and the only interesting narrative threads are the tie-ins to Far Cry 5. When all the best parts of a new game are the old parts, it's hard to be excited about what comes next. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Apex Legends

Embracing the new frontier

9.25

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style 60-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Respawn Entertainment **Release** February 4 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Fight alongside your friends for supremacy in Titanfall's powered-up version of battle royale

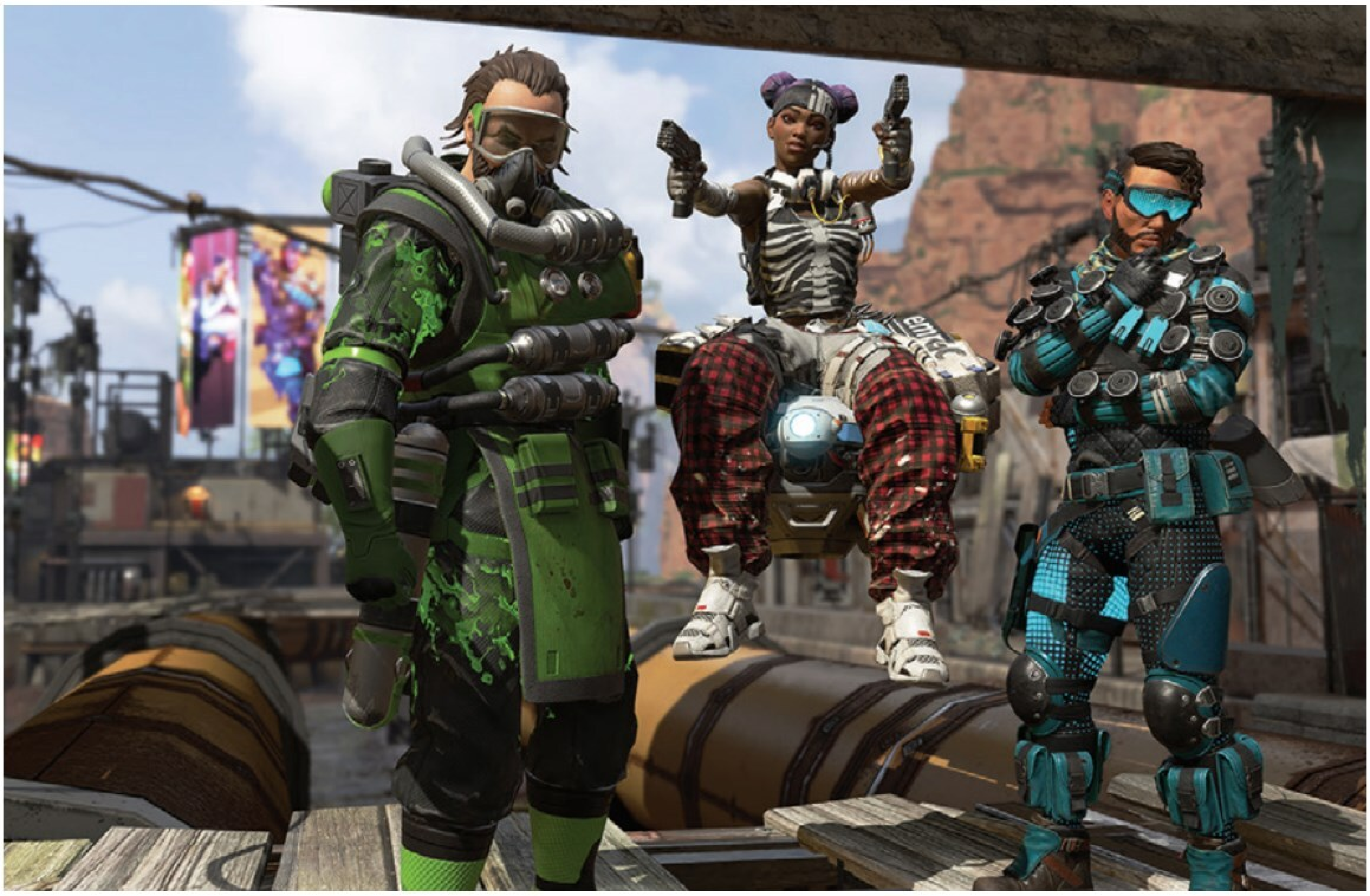
» **Graphics**
Apex Legends walks a fine line between animated character design and realistic weaponry, even if environmental textures are muddy

» **Sound**
The score thumps and blares in all the right places, especially in the match's opening moments. The sound design is tense enough to make you fret over every approaching footstep or distant gunshot

» **Playability**
Learning the ins and outs of every character is surprisingly easy, and streamlined elements like the pinging system make Apex Legends the most accessible battle royale yet

» **Entertainment**
Respawn successfully blends battle royale and hero shooters to great effect, raising the bar for free-to-play first-person shooters

» **Replay Value**
High



Leaving the past behind can be tricky. With Titanfall, the team at Respawn Entertainment built its legacy on the concept of titans, massive robots that beat the gears out of one another on a raging battlefield. Titanfall 2 was loved for its quality single-player campaign. With the newly released (and free-to-play) Apex Legends, the developer is throwing most of its legacy to the wayside to put its own spin on gaming's biggest trend.

Though Apex Legends is set in Titanfall's universe, it has no titans or single-player modes. Instead, it's a fusion of battle royale and hero-driven shooters where 20 squads of three battle for glory, using their brains, brawn, and super-charged abilities to carve a path to victory. This design probably sounds like a recipe for chaotic disaster given how many elements it juggles. However, Respawn's gambit has resulted in a fresh take on battle royale thanks to elegant features that make the experience accessible to genre newcomers and consistently entertaining.

On the surface, Apex Legends is no different than the squad modes in other battle royales. Your squad drops onto the map and, upon landing, you move quickly to gather up supplies and duke it out with other squads as a massive circle of death herds everyone to a single spot on the map. A lot of the time you are hiding in houses or military bases, waiting to engage in tense firefights. However, the powers the game gives its players makes these quiet moments and planning periods engaging.

Apex Legends has eight likeable characters to select (you have to unlock two of them with in-game currency, but it doesn't take long) and each one is essentially a class. The sassy Lifeline, for example, is a medic who can summon a drone to heal nearby players and even drop massive caches of supplies from time to time. These distinct abilities make planning before the drop more important, with skilled players taking the time to compose their squad. Bangalore's evasive abilities are useful, but is the spot she's taking worth giving up a squad medic for? The choices you make on the character-select screen have just as much

impact as the twitch-based ones you make in the middle of a gunfight.

Combat in Apex Legends is satisfying. Movement is fantastic, all the guns feel powerful, and the powers ratchet up the intensity to ridiculous heights. In addition to the uniqueness of the character-driven playstyle, the game boasts a number of elegant features, like the handy ping system. That sounds like a simple thing, but the ping is diverse when it comes to what you're marking. You can tag enemies for your team. When you ping a weapon on the ground, your team sees exactly what kind of weapon it is. They can also ping that weapon back to claim dibs. This system is truly impressive, making non-verbal communication not only viable, but breezy and effective. The jumpmaster system is also an effective way of streamlining one of battle royale's more frustrating early stages, because it gives a single player control over where the squad lands on the map – but also gives the other players the ability to break away.

Apex Legends' foundation is a strong one, filled with tons of potential thanks to its satisfying combat and savvy implantation of team-based features. However, its ugly map could use a touch-up, and solo-focused players might find themselves disappointed by the lack of a free-for-all mode. That said, as someone who played solo battle royale almost exclusively before this game, I enjoy how Apex Legends' team-based features encourage everyone to work together, and even make it possible to play effectively with random users.

The free-to-play progression system is fair, with you earning cosmetics like skins for character weapons through lootboxes. You don't ever have to spend a dime in the game if you don't want to, with none of the core mechanics being imprisoned behind oppressive gates.

Apex Legends is not Titanfall, but that doesn't mean it's not a special game packed with potential for greatness. I've put a lot of hours into Respawn's latest, and haven't had the desire to stop yet. The combination of character-driven powers, streamlined team features, and fantastic gunplay have elevated this unexpected spin-off into my go-to battle royale, and I don't see that changing anytime soon. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Metro Exodus

Stepping out of the shadows

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take the Metro experience out of the underground tunnels and into the irradiated wastelands of Russia

» Graphics
4A Games crafted gorgeous vistas set in different seasons for this trip out into the wider world

» Sound
The weakest element of Exodus is its wooden acting, which sometimes deflates the emotion of a character exchange. The sound effects on the other hand are fantastic

» Playability
With more abundant resources, Exodus eases up the attrition on normal difficulty compared to past games. The shooting mechanics are solid, but the traversal through tighter spaces and vertical areas is sometimes finicky

» Entertainment
Artyom's journey across Russia is filled with interesting locales, a steady flow of new enemy types, and a cause worth fighting for

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** 4A Games **Release** February 15 **Rating** M

The Metro series has never delivered a runaway hit to elevate it among the most esteemed first-person shooters. But over the course of two critically acclaimed games and a well-executed remaster collection, it has steadily gained an audience appreciative of its dynamic gameplay, grounded storytelling, and gripping tension. Developer 4A Games aims to step out of the shadows of cult fandom and challenge for mainstream acceptance with Metro Exodus, taking the action out of the cramped underground and into the irradiated Russian landscape. With a gorgeously realized world and a well-paced campaign, Exodus makes a compelling case for that acceptance, even though some anachronisms keep the story from realizing its full potential.

Artyom and crew have left the Metro in search of a better life, and each stop along the transcontinental voyage offers a new territory to explore, from the flooded flatlands of the Volga River to the dried and dusty former waterfront of the Caspian Sea. Metro Exodus isn't a singular open world, but rather a series of defined sandboxes that allow players freedom to go where they want and tackle objectives at their own pace. 4A Games' technical prowess is on full display in these dynamic play spaces, with gorgeous lighting illuminating the impressive landscapes. The variety of environments and seasons keep the game feeling fresh throughout the roughly 25-hour campaign, delivering new factions to battle and new mutated beasts to fight or flee. The trip occasionally deviates from open areas in favor of a more straightforward mission that recalls the level design of its predecessors. Metro Exodus' greatest triumph is this well-tuned pacing; no region overstays its welcome, and all have interesting places to explore and memorable characters to meet. The suffocating atmosphere and supernatural occurrences that pervaded your every action in the previous games are sparser this time around, but each region has its own foreboding locations where the jump scares and dread reside.

4A Games has always held storytelling in high regard, and that emphasis continues here. If the previous two games were influenced primarily by Half-Life, Exodus takes its narrative cues from MachineGames' recent Wolfenstein titles – almost to a fault. Between missions, you spend time aboard the Aurora locomotive hanging around your compatriots, gaining insight into their personalities and motivations. Some characters are unique, but others feel eerily familiar – the handyman Tokarev and love interest Anna bear an uncanny resemblance to Set Roth and Anya, respectively. Your friends suffer sicknesses, celebrate marriages, express unshakeable hope, and occasionally succumb to despair throughout your

journey, bringing everyone closer together. The ending is bittersweet, but the journey is what leaves the biggest impression.

I applaud the attempt to bring more depth to these characters and the world, but the emotional impact of the story's most dramatic moments is often undermined by wooden voice performances. At times, the actors sound like they are listlessly reading words off a script. The lack of back and forth between Artyom and his crew also robs the scenes of their intended weight. Artyom has always been the strong and silent type, but these conversations feel awkward given the length at which many of these characters speak to him with no response whatsoever. When his wife, Anna, struggles to come to grips with the moral complexity of a situation the crew just extracted itself from, his silence feels downright perplexing.

Artyom may be a terrible conversationalist, but he's a capable guerrilla fighter. As with the previous games, most of the time Exodus allows you to approach combat scenarios however you like. Attacking at night with a stealth approach lets you avoid wanton bloodshed, which can alter the outcome of your interactions with the various factions and determine the fate of certain sidekicks. If you prefer to shoot first and ask questions later, you have that option as well. Combat rewards precision and punishes firing wildly, which I appreciate. The variety of weapons and their accompanying attachments also give you a lot of flexibility on the battlefield and encourages experimentation; I frequently tweaked my loadout on the fly to try new configurations. If Artyom has a limitation, it's his traversal skills. His movements are slow and cumbersome when climbing, and the logic of what he can and can't vault is inconsistent.

Exploring every point of interest is the best way to find new attachments and critical upgrades to your equipment. Resources have never been overflowing in the Metro series, but you won't run out of ammo or med packs too often in Exodus if you thoroughly scavenge, a change that should appeal to action-hungry run-and-gunners. Those who crave the challenging attrition of the previous games should turn up the difficulty before beginning the campaign. The removal of the previous games' bullet economy takes away a lot of the tension of managing resources, but certain segments of the game still make you count your bullets.

Metro Exodus largely succeeds in its ambitions. The freeform sandboxes give players more agency to play how they want to play, and the smart level design and well-tuned pacing keep the experience feeling fresh throughout the campaign. The story may suffer from weak acting and 4A's decision to keep Artyom a silent protagonist, but these shortcomings don't stop me from recommending the game to both newcomers and series fans. » **Matt Bertz**

Wargroove

Inheriting the throne

9.25

Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Command medieval armies of knights, harpies, and sea turtles across several modes

» Graphics
The pixelated graphics are a gleeful nod to strategy games of yore, though some of the text can be hard to read

» Sound
Every commander has their own theme music, though the standard fantasy soundtrack can sometimes bleed together

» Playability
Commanding units is straightforward and quick, despite some minor menu hang-ups. A zoomed-in view makes it easier to focus on the battle when undocked on Switch

» Entertainment
Wargroove offers several ways to get your turn-based strategy fix, whether it's playing through an hours-long campaign, creating your own scenarios, or playing online

» Replay Value
High

game informer GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Strategy (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Chucklefish **Developer** Chucklefish **Release** February 1 **Rating** E10+

After her father is assassinated and her forces overwhelmed, times are dire for Mercia, a newly minted queen who must prove she's capable of leading an established empire to victory. Wargroove sits in a similar place, as it hopes to prove itself worthy of a mantle worn by other greats in the turn-based tactics genre. Thankfully, it captures the appeal of its inspirations while also making some inspired decisions, making it much more than a retread of an established field.

Wargroove is firmly planted in the colorful and lighthearted turn-based warfare of tactics games like Advance Wars, but it's all business when it comes to the fundamentals. The basic mechanics seem simple at first, as you slowly build an army of medieval infantry and creatures, claim the territory and gold necessary to finance it, then push into your opponent's side of a grid-based map. Even so, Wargroove gives you plenty to learn. The campaign teaches you the ins and outs of warfare, then ramps up into a satisfying, well-paced experience. Tips are rolled out at a slow but steady clip, which is necessary for a game with plenty of details to obsess over.

Mercia's quest is chock-full of misunderstandings that lead to full-scale conflicts with other nations, which conveniently provide opportunities to build armies and test your strategic prowess. Beating some of the later missions felt like a huge accomplishment, and I regularly kicked into “one more turn” mode as I tried to break a chokepoint with only a healer and a knight, or risk an entire skirmish on slipping a key unit past the enemy's pincer strike in an unprotected wagon.

Some of the later missions made me long for mid-mission checkpoints (especially when one dumb, accidental move cost me a match), but the limitations raise the stakes and make victory that much sweeter. The computer opponent also makes some dunderheaded moves on occasion, but provides a good challenge for the most part, and the overwhelming odds most missions throw at you make up for the obvious mistakes.

The hierarchy of infantry, airborne units, and powerful seafaring creatures and vessels is varied but succinct, giving every unit a distinct purpose and counter on the battlefield. Blinded by fog? Recruit a few dogs and plant them on mountaintops to cut through it. Need to stop the lumbering golem wrecking your soldiers? Build a trebuchet, but remember that it can't move and launch its payload on the same turn. Predicting what units your opponent might have up their sleeve turns every match into an engaging series of puzzles that collide with each other as you manage different fronts, and an at-a-glance breakdown of what every unit is strong and weak against helps push your strategy in the right direction.

Commanders are the strongest units under your control, but losing them in the field of battle means losing the match. They have access to powerful “groove” abilities, like being able to summon any unit right next to them. Some are stronger than others, but they all introduce just enough flash to make every fight interesting without feeling like a game-winning crutch.

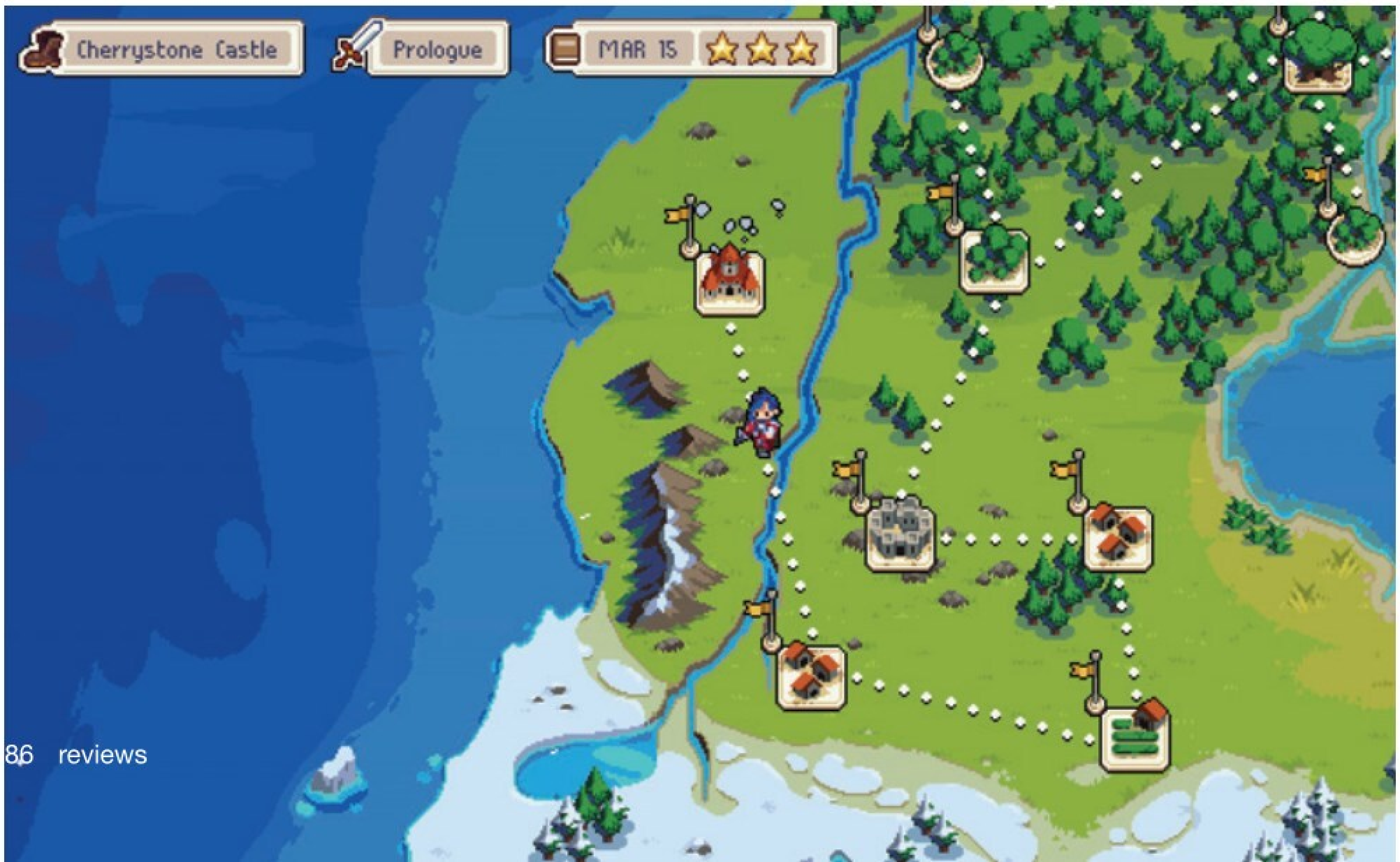
One brilliant twist on the tactics formula Wargroove thrives on are its critical hits, which give every unit a way to deal extra damage under a set condition. Knights hit extra-hard if they charge a full six spaces before attacking, while golems power up at low health. I love the strategic layer added by maximizing my army's effectiveness by tweaking the specific angles, distances, and order of my offense (as well as weather conditions), since it removes the onus to blindly throw a mass of units at a problem.

Another way Wargroove stands out is in how many outlets it gives you to test your mettle, each of them fun and catering to a different need. Along with a meaty campaign, you can jump into the speedier arcade mode, which has you pick a commander and pits you in a five-match gauntlet on random maps against the A.I.; I appreciate having a way to just sit down and play a couple of self-contained matches. If you want an even shorter burst of action, a number of clever puzzles task you with completing a set objective in a single turn.

Multiplayer lets you hop into a match with a few other players either locally or online, though I would have liked the option to fill in missing slots with computer opponents. The connections in the matches I played seemed to hold up, though the lobby system could use some tweaking when it comes to playing with friends. If the included maps aren't enough you can make your own, with a fantastic degree of customization. You can even make your own campaigns, complete with cutscenes and overworld maps. I'm generally not the type to dive into creative suites, but I'm impressed with how thorough the editor is, and I'm curious to see what comes of it.

It might be easy to peg Wargroove as an imitator, but its genius is in the details. With tons of modes and maps it doesn't skimp on content, but the approachable-yet-nuanced tactics at its heart, as well as the way it deftly iterates on the genre, make it an outstanding title. It might be building on a strong foundation, but Wargroove earns its crown on its own merits.

» Suriel Vazquez



Jump Force

Super smash blunders

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Spike Chunsoft **Release** February 15 **Rating** T

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Make a 40-character mashup fighting game using the popular and obscure characters under the Shonen Jump umbrella

» Graphics
The realism afforded by the Unreal engine does no favors to any of the characters, all of whom were born from the pages of manga

» Sound
The music vacillates between scary orchestration and upbeat pan flute at the drop of a hat. It's often jarring and confusing

» Playability
Executing flashy special attacks is easy, which leads to satisfying moments in combat. Outside of combat, controlling your avatar in the hub area is awkward

» Entertainment
Seeing characters from different franchises fight one another is exciting, but the overall presentation drags the whole experience down

» Replay Value
Moderate

Jump Force is not the first time characters from disparate Shonen Jump manga and anime franchises have faced off against one another in a fighting game, but this release represents the biggest and flashiest mashup brawl they have ever engaged in. The 40 characters have multiple bombastic animations for their noteworthy attacks, and it's all wrapped up in a goofy story where universes collide. Unfortunately, the combat never realizes its potential, and the sloppy presentation drags down everything else.

The combat is Jump Force's strongest element. It is a fighting game, but not in the traditional sense. You don't need to learn every fighter's best combos and counters; every character plays similarly, and pulling off their big special attacks is more about keeping an eye on the meters that build up as you take and receive damage. I like how combat is more about finding the best windows to execute your big attacks, and I enjoyed experimenting with finding the best three-character combos to take into the fray, which highlights the fun mashup nature of the game. Playing as Midoriya from *My Hero Academia* and hitting Goku from *Dragon Ball* as he charges up a Kamehameha with a Detroit Smash is an exciting thing – which is admittedly difficult to explain to non-fans.

When you find the rhythm of combat, the experience becomes a spectator sport, for better or worse. The big, flashy combat animations are impressive, but they are also time-consuming and emphasize the back-and-forth nature of each fight in a bland way. It boils down to: "You do your big attack, and I will wait until the animation completes. Then I do mine, and you do yours again until someone's health reaches zero." Even with the myriad special attacks you can see by choosing different characters, it all becomes repetitive.

The story conceit for why everyone gets together is silly – maybe even dumb – but that's fine. It's an excuse to get characters like Goku and Luffy in a room together to talk about how hungry they are, or to see Trunks and Kenshiro connecting because they are both from apocalyptic settings. But those character moments have no emotion to them. Nearly every cutscene amounts to an assortment of characters standing still and, at most, turning their heads toward one another to speak. On the rare occasion that a cutscene has movement, it is the least amount of movement possible. At one point, when a character was meant to leave the frame, they just slid out of view without taking an actual step. These low standards for presentation make every potentially interesting moment feel cheap and boring.

Getting to those story moments is also needlessly obtuse. When there aren't story missions available at the mission counter, I just had to walk around the large hub area until I found the next character who had an exclamation point over their head. The hub area is boring, and if you're playing online, it is overloaded with online players crowding the mission areas and clipping through one another, sometimes even making it difficult to talk to the NPC to accept a mission. It makes it feel like you're trying to order a drink at a busy bar instead of rushing to save the world from devastation.

To make all of it worse, the loading is insufferable. The load times leading into a cutscene or fight can take 30-45 seconds – sometimes longer than the thing you're waiting to see. The loading also makes the already-obnoxious elements that much worse. Even accessing upgrade menus or stores requires a load. The store to buy fun, referential clothing items and accessories for your customizable character is especially long, and it doesn't let you preview the clothing you want to buy on your character. One of the biggest incentives for continued play in Jump Force is the opportunity to dress up your avatar in Shonen Jump paraphernalia, so it's disappointing that the process is so difficult.

For all the harm the middling presentation does to Jump Force, the fighting does have satisfying explosive moments and the online versus mode does work well. There is depth to uncover in the combat, but it never truly sang to me or made me excited to tackle the next fight. Mostly I was just happy to not have to repeat a fight when I won, even if I was performing iconic attacks from some of my favorite anime. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Dirt Rally 2.0

Staying focused

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Add more career-type elements to the racing, which remains the real meat of the franchise

» Graphics
The game is gorgeous overall. Objects occasionally pop in, but it's not distracting. Lens flare and other graphical effects, however, can force you to favor certain cameras depending on the situation

» Sound
The co-driver's pacenotes are informative and excellent, even including this quip: "Is that a puncture on the right rear?" He knows damn well it is

» Playability
Even without the luxury of being able to rewind after crashes, the game has enough assists and other ways to customize the difficulty so you can enjoy it at any skill level

» Entertainment
Codemasters delivers another captivating rally title that will have you swearing in fear and delight

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Codemasters **Developer** Codemasters **Release** February 26 **Rating** E

Efficiency is the goal in rally racing, from your co-driver's no-nonsense pacenotes (while under duress, I might add) to the fix-only-what-needs-fixing-now scramble of repairs between stages. Even when you're hurtling down a country road in Poland reacting at speed to the semi-unknown, moving the steering wheel only as much as you absolutely need to is the difference between surviving to the next turn and sending yourself into a race-ending skid. This model of efficiency gives Dirt Rally 2.0 focus, channeling your efforts in the right direction and guiding you when you need it most.

Codemasters' titles from the last few years have presented their own career mode wrinkles. Dirt Rally 2.0 certainly features a more fleshed-out racing organization than the original, complete with staff to hire and car upgrades, but it isn't the same as those in the F1 series or even the core Dirt franchise. Dirt Rally 2.0 is not as involved as those other Codemasters titles, but I appreciate that it cuts to the chase. Upgrading your staff gets you tangible improvements. Instead of a nebulous two-percent increase in performance, for instance, an upgraded staff takes time directly off your repairs and penalties for flipping off the track. That kind of specificity spurs you to put your credits where you need it most.

Upgrading your car parts centers on each car individually. For instance, your rallycross car in particular wears through the clutch and dampers faster, so those are the areas you can upgrade first. While there's something to be said for the freedom to do whatever you want, at the end of the day I had more credits in my bank to spend on getting other cars and upgrades because I didn't feel pressured to use them on stuff that didn't make a material difference in the end.

I like how the game approaches how your car parts wear down, allowing you to quick fix them during an event at the cost of imparting more wear (something upgrades decrease). Wear also factors into the used cars (which you can test drive beforehand), which come needing their own repairs – something which would be helpful to know before you bought them.

As prepared as I was with upgrades and repairs before an event, I was always nervous when starting a stage, even if I'd done it before. The track degrades in career events, which influences your tire compound selection and adds another variable to consider while driving. I tended to make my big mistakes at the beginning of a stage; even in the long, 10-minute-plus stages, I became more confident the longer I drove. I attribute this to both getting in a driving rhythm and with understanding how the car feels on the different surfaces. It's also the game doing a good job in giving consistent feedback so I can subconsciously take into account the pacenotes, weather, surface, car handling, braking power, and other variables in an instant and usually make the right decision. Perhaps the outlier in this is the tarmac surface, which I struggled to get a handle on and was more slippery than I expected. I also would have liked more vibration through the gamepad to further differentiate the racing surfaces and conditions, adding another dimension.

While the staff setup and gameplay are Dirt Rally 2.0's strengths, it's only adequate in other areas. The multiplayer has timed events and championship sessions you can construct, but that's the minimum you'd expect. The FIA World Rallycross Championship licensed season has no bells and whistles (and frankly I tire of going through all the successive heats in rallycross), and the random stage generation of Dirt 4's Your Stage has been removed, cutting down on the number of stages you can race.

Dirt Rally 2.0 doesn't have every feature under the sun, but I trust it. I know I can put together a good team that's going to help me win events, and the gameplay delivers, letting me skate that line between confidence and foolishness without knowing the difference. **» Matthew Kato**

Crackdown 3

With great powers come great predictability

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Developer** Sumo Digital, Elbow Rocket **Release** February 15 **Rating** M

Crackdown was a surprise hit back in 2007, giving Xbox 360 players who may have only been in it for the Halo 3 demo a chance to be a superhero. Dismantling Pacific City's criminal network – or even puttering around town – was a blast, with an arsenal that included high-flying acrobatics, super strength, and a kit of exotic weapons that let you turn traffic jams into smoldering lines of debris. A disappointing sequel followed, which added little and ultimately failed to innovate or capture the spark of the original. Now, a dozen years later, the series is back in an all-new entry that, well, fails to innovate or capture the spark of the original. It's not bad, but Crackdown 3 is a bland and uninspired time capsule of a game.

The unrelenting drabness is especially frustrating because maneuvering your agent around New Providence's neon-lined streets is an absolute joy. The character is quick and responsive, and after collecting several hundred agility orbs, you can move with surgical precision. In the rare times that I found myself flailing in midair, I could lean into a variety of thrusts and additional leaps to get back on course. I can't overstate how great it feels. The problem is that once you get to wherever you're going – whether it's the top of a massive tower or a crime lord's inner sanctum – the action is a predictable last-gen letdown.

Twelve years ago, leaping onto the scene with a rocket launcher and sending bad guys ragdolling into the sky was still a novelty. Games have evolved since then, and simply rehashing the same action all these years later isn't satisfying. The underlying systems in Crackdown 3 aren't deep or flexible enough to generate sandbox moments that you want to tell your friends about, either. Part of the reason why the first game was so successful was that it was so surprising. This entry is like hearing the same joke again; when you can anticipate the punchline, it's boring.

New Providence is a bland network of themed zones and an abundance of ramps connected by maze-like freeway systems. It's run by a sinister organization called TerraNova, which you take out piece by piece. You can try to head straight for the final boss if you want, but good luck. She's heavily defended, so you're better served whittling away her defenses by going after her heads of security, science, and technology. First, you have to bait them out by blowing up their stuff. Sometimes that stuff is shrouded behind force fields, which you turn off by unplugging refrigerator-sized power cores, but that's really about it. These individual tasks are technically different, but ultimately it comes down to destroying nodes or killing officers. Once you get ahold of a rocket launcher or other explosive weapon it's trivially easy, and the only incentive to try new tactics is because you're bored of using the same successful strategies.

Multiplayer is another throwback experience, reminiscent of the era where every shooter had a competitive mode crammed in. When it was first unveiled, multiplayer seemed to be trying something new: Up to 10 players battle in destructible worlds, showing off the kind of mayhem that's only possible with current-gen tech. That was the pitch, but the reality is far more mundane. The aggressive lock-on targeting that makes the campaign so easy doesn't do multiplayer any favors, and most fights immediately devolve into two Agents jumping around in a circle, facing each other and trying to unload their weapons faster. Falling debris doesn't cause any damage, so when the building you're on starts to crumble (or when one crumbles on your head), at the worst you're temporarily inconvenienced. Without any kind of party support, you can't even goof off in the mode with your buddies. It seems like a cheap afterthought, from the paucity of maps and modes to the way you're kicked out to the menu when a match concludes.

Destruction was clearly on the developers' mind, which makes it frustrating that it's isolated to the lame competitive multiplayer. No matter how much I pummeled the city with rockets and missiles, I barely left a scuffmark. It feels like playing in a sandbox made of concrete. Blowing up cars and lawn furniture is good for a laugh or two, especially with a co-op friend, but that excitement is fleeting. Driving remains an afterthought; your character is so fleet of foot and collecting orbs is so vital that hoofing it is just a better option than wasting time behind the wheel of the poorly controlling rides.

Sumo and Elbow Rocket's insistence on treating a game from 2007 like a sacred text is strange. The original Crackdown was fresh and exhilarating, and bounding across the city as a superhuman agent was a thrilling sensation. Since then, a lot has happened in the genre. Developers have found ways to incorporate destruction into the action as they weave interesting choices and competent world-building into their narratives. Crackdown 3 aims far lower, and manages to hit that disappointing target. » **Jeff Cork**

6

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Revisit the long-dormant franchise in a new entry that stays remarkably faithful to the original

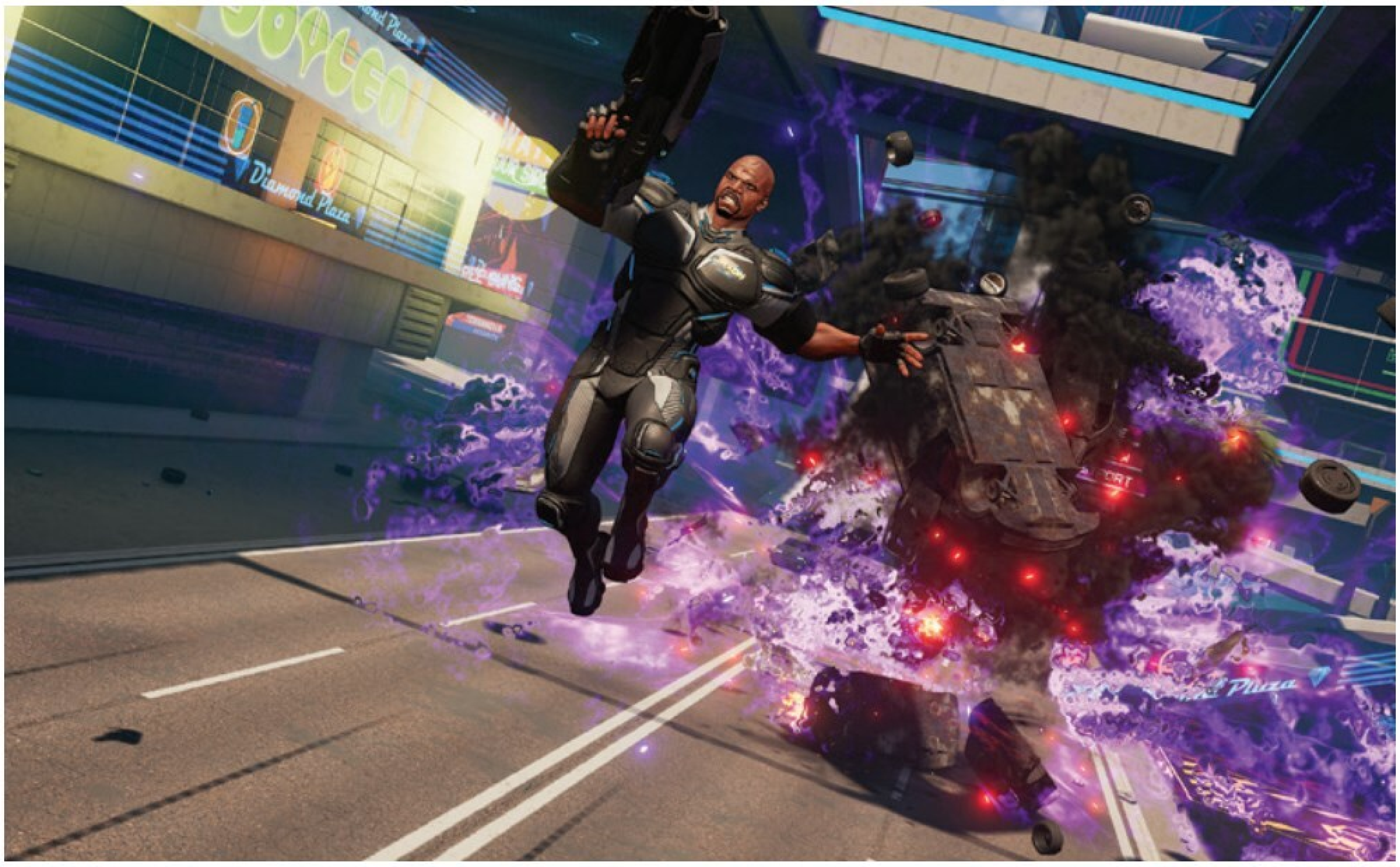
» Graphics
Crackdown's visuals are clean to the point of seeming sterile

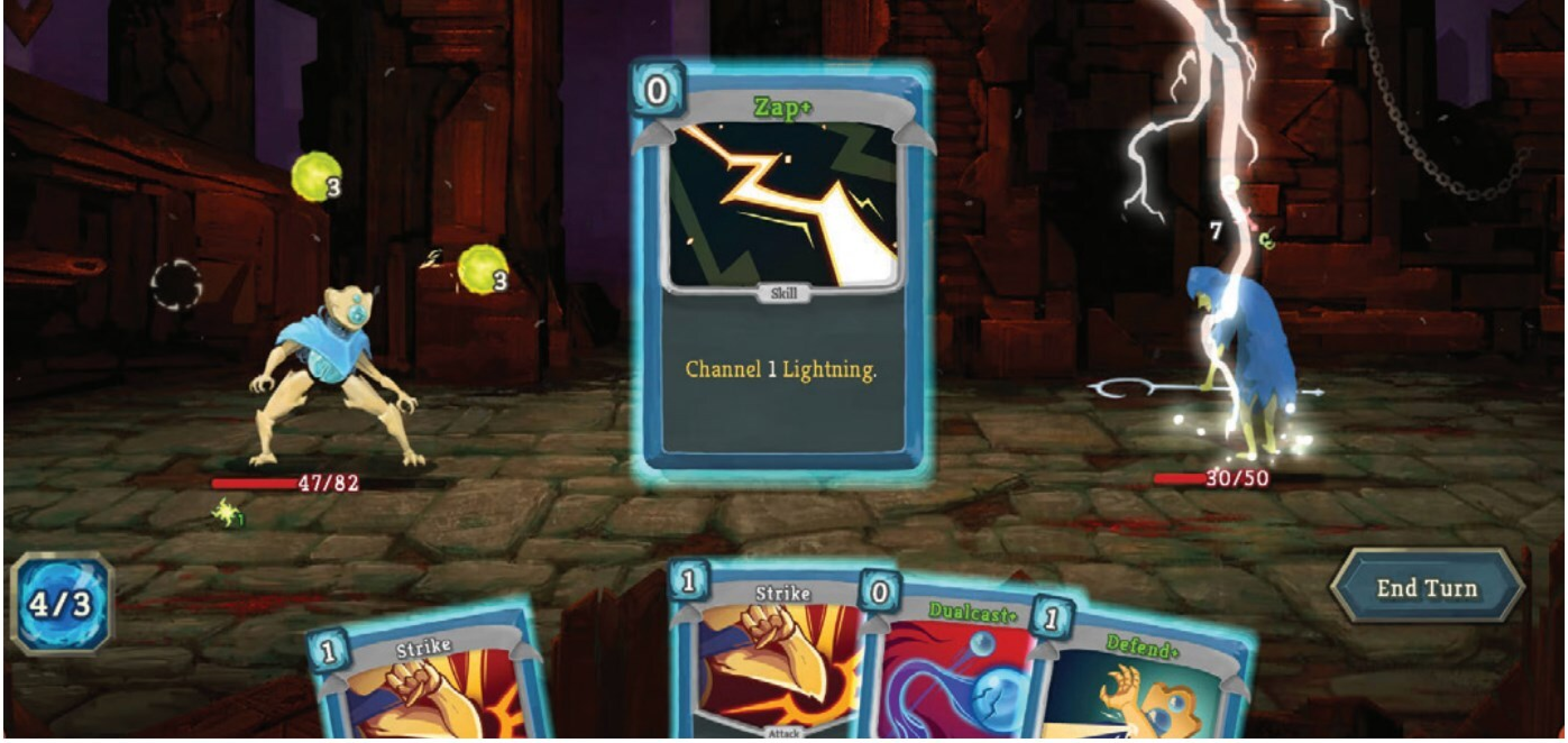
» Sound
Hearing the Agency Director's familiar voice and the throbbing ping of agility orbs all these years later is fun. The rest of the audioscape is dominated by a predictable symphony of explosions and gunfire

» Playability
Moving your Agent around New Providence is an absolute joy, thanks to the precise and intuitive controls. When the game demands pinpoint platform accuracy, it delivers

» Entertainment
Crackdown 3's campaign is like a thawed-out relic from more than a decade ago. Multiplayer's environmental destruction is interesting in concept, but its bare-bones nature keeps it from being more than a curiosity

» Replay Value
Moderately low





Slay The Spire

A dazzling dungeon dive

9.25

PC

» Concept
Climb the spire and defeat big bosses with different builds and options each time

» Graphics
The '90s Flash-game visuals don't do the title any favors, but they can be forgiven considering the rest of the ensemble

» Sound
The soundtrack highlights earnest exploration and dire boss battles

» Playability
Players of all skill levels can easily understand and engage with the mechanics

» Entertainment
An incredibly well-crafted dungeon delve with hundreds of hours of crawling chaos

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Mega Crit Games **Developer** Mega Crit Games **Release** January 23 **Rating** E10+

Slay the Spire is a fusion of deck-building card games and rogue-like RPGs. Before your eyes glaze over and you tune out, don't be turned off by those terms; Slay the Spire has nothing to do with Magic: The Gathering, Hearthstone, or any collectible card game. Instead, cards are simply the tools you use to create the classic fantasy archetype of your choice to brave the many dangers of a challenging dungeon that's deliciously different every time. Whether you fall to the lesser slimes and thieves or succumb to a floor's big boss, you're inspired to climb again and again to try new builds and experience new adventures.

As a warrior, rogue, or robot mage, you start with a deck of basic attack and defense cards each game. As you travel, you add and remove cards to craft a (hopefully) overpowered deck to destroy your enemies. Most of the time, you want to distill your deck down to the purest and most powerful cards, but some strategies call for towering stacks of cards. In addition to your ever-shifting arsenal, you acquire potions and relics (passive and often significant buffs, some hinging on specific game plans) to help you on your way. Each massive floor of the spire presents standard battles, elite monsters, and shops. You also encounter random adventure vignettes that could have you betting on an arena battle, spinning a goblin wheel, stealing valuable treasure, and many other choices that can augment your play style. One run may prod you into a build embracing discard mechanics, another may allow you to conserve your resources from turn to turn. The choices are always yours, but relics and available cards can push you in varying directions.

Slay the Spire is all about options that are different every time, leading to nearly infinite replayability even on the standard difficulty (with an optional fourth act that can be unlocked for the hardest of the hardcore). The core loop is intensely compelling, pitting you against bosses, monsters, and encounters with vastly disparate tools each run, even though one death shoots you back to the bottom floor of the spire for a fresh start. Whether you're creating a knight with impenetrable armor, a poison-stacking scoundrel, or an orb-cycling caster, coming up with all kinds of strategies that change each game based on the hand you're dealt is incredibly satisfying and fun. Sticking a card that triples poison on a boss, coming up with a zero-casting cost dynamo that can play a whole deck in a single turn, or just piling on heaps of strength and smashing through your enemies feels magical. Yes, elements of randomness can boom or bust a run, but they're not going to dissuade you from climbing again and again.

You're not getting any permanent power boosts from run to run, but points acquired get you closer to unlocking new cards and relics that can show up in future attempts, some that allow for creative or radical theorycrafting, like building a deck that attempts to reduce your draw pile to zero continuously so that a special card that requires that condition to play can devastate opponents. Even after you've memorized every boss ability and mastered every card and relic, voracious players can tackle daily challenges with various modifiers that let you pit your skills against the world and shoot for a high score. You can also tinker around with custom modifiers and craft a dungeon dive to whimsical and wild specifications. After a brutal defeat, there's nothing better than setting a run up where enemies drop relics instead of cards, you can ignore dungeon paths from room to room, and all enemies have the slow debuff. You have lots of mods to pick from, so the possibilities seem endless.

Slay the Spire is a fascinating fusion of genres that are often known for their lack of accessibility and niche appeal, but it defies those notions and provides a playground of variation and wonder where the next discovery is always right around the corner. Instead of being dismayed when a boss lands an alpha strike that blasts you back to the beginning, it's an inspiring call to start climbing again with new choices, new decisions, and maybe just a little bit of luck.

» **Daniel Tack**

Sunless Skies

Stories that soar above

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Failbetter Games **Developer** Failbetter Games **Release** January 31 **Rating** NR

Sunless Skies is an awesome, immersive ride for lovers of imaginative fiction and horror-laden exploration. The melding of genres bears delicious and strange fruit as top-down action mixes with compelling vignette stories. You fly a steam locomotive from port to port, injecting yourself into dozens of tales with myriad outcomes. Though hindered slightly by combat and repetition, this mesmerizing tale begs to be experienced.

Sunless Skies is the successor to developer Failbetter Games' Sunless Sea, though you can safely jump in here with no prior experience. After selecting your character and a win condition, you're ready to take your locomotive on its first journeys of discovery in this world of weird fantasy and hypnagogic terrors. Death is part of the tale, and your legacy (and locomotive) is passed on from captain to captain. You retain some resources and experience from one game to the next, so you're never starting over. Perhaps you meet your end almost immediately at the hands of merciless marauders or other sky-terrors. Maybe you run out of supplies on the outer rim, forced to resort to cannibalism until you're completely and utterly spent, your wreck floating off as your mind snaps and the terror meter topples what's left of your sanity. The constant threat of death keeps the tension high and forces you to make difficult decisions in what to prioritize, but the persistent development between captains maintains a satisfying sense of progress.

Choices are around every corner, and your options grow as your investment in stat points unlocks new potential. These stat-based opportunity checks, like a chance to win favor from some nobles with your charm, or a shot at cracking open a frozen wreck's door – give you a sense of growing power outside of gear and resources. Sometimes your choices echo throughout the world; consuming your crew might be an immediate solution to quell hunger, but your taste for flesh may come back to haunt you. Siding with one faction in a large-scale war opens doors for you in some ports and stories, but closes others where the declining faction may be forced to relocate or abandon critical areas. While these choices make a difference in the moment-to-moment individual tales, you never feel like you're altering the world – you're a mere speck in the endless stretch of sky.

Creating captivating fiction in games can be a daunting task, yet Sunless Skies accomplishes this with an electrifying zeal. It is one of the most creative and interesting worlds I have ever had the pleasure of playing in. From facing unknown horrors lurking in the mist, trading barrels of time for favors, and attending a ball that never ends, the surreal universe leaves you wanting to uncover the hidden tales and mysteries that lie at every port. While Sunless Skies has an overarching narrative, the devil is in the details, with each port providing its own captivating tales. Bizarre and inspired, these romps through mushroom mysteries, grand bazaars, and grim mausoleums keep you going like a good book, braving the horrors of the skies to turn the next prolific page.

The combat is a lackluster affair of swiveling about and aiming your weapons at enemies. It's a threadbare system that lacks punch, but it effectively keeps the tension high as the weight of entering new areas with deadly airy monstrosities has you gritting your teeth and punching the boosters. You can lean into combat and harvest rewards from powerful monsters by purchasing combat-oriented ships and potent weapons, but I chose trading vessels that were better off avoiding combat in almost every situation and opting out of most battles. Playing in this fashion allowed me to avoid most of the dull cannon-firing and hull-boosting, instead focusing on additional cargo space and harvesting tools.

To succeed in combat (and everything else), you need sovereigns. Cash can be hard to come by early on, and the easiest way to get them is by buying low and selling high from port to port through a questing system. This is a great way to spur you on to find new places and give you additional incentives to keep visiting ports. However, flying from port to port can become an especially repetitive chore as you attempt to work up a solid base of resources, and many quests also have you ferrying back and forth to the point where some of the awe of the world is lost in reiteration.

Sunless Skies is a strange amalgamation of genres with even stranger stories to tell, but the weird world and nightmarish encounters come together to create something special. Combat and repetition may weigh down the Homeric adventure, but the overall journey is well worth the ticket.

» **Daniel Tack**

8.75

PC

» **Concept**
Captain a flying steam locomotive in a surreal world as you search for fame, fortune, or hidden truth

» **Graphics**
While lacking in graphical intensity, the environments do an excellent job of conveying atmosphere

» **Sound**
Haunting melodies and terrifying vibrations sell the voyage through an alternate reality

» **Playability**
Somewhere between visual novel and hardcore roguelike, getting into a groove can be a challenging task, but multiple difficulty dials help take the edge off the experience

» **Entertainment**
A fascinating, immersive trek. Sunless Skies excels at world-building and begs to be experienced by anyone who enjoys a dark story

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

8 Farm Together

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** January 18 **Rating** E

I am having a blast playing this game with my daughter, and it's just nice to see a game that doesn't make you stress in any way. Just sit back, relax, and watch the fields grow. – Andrew Reiner

8.25 Ape Out

Platform Switch • PC **Release** February 28 **Rating** T

You begin in a cell. You break out. Your job is to make it across each procedurally generated maze while fending off attacking soldiers. This is the whole game – and it's an utter delight. – Javy Gwaltney

7.25 Angry Birds VR: Isle Of Pigs

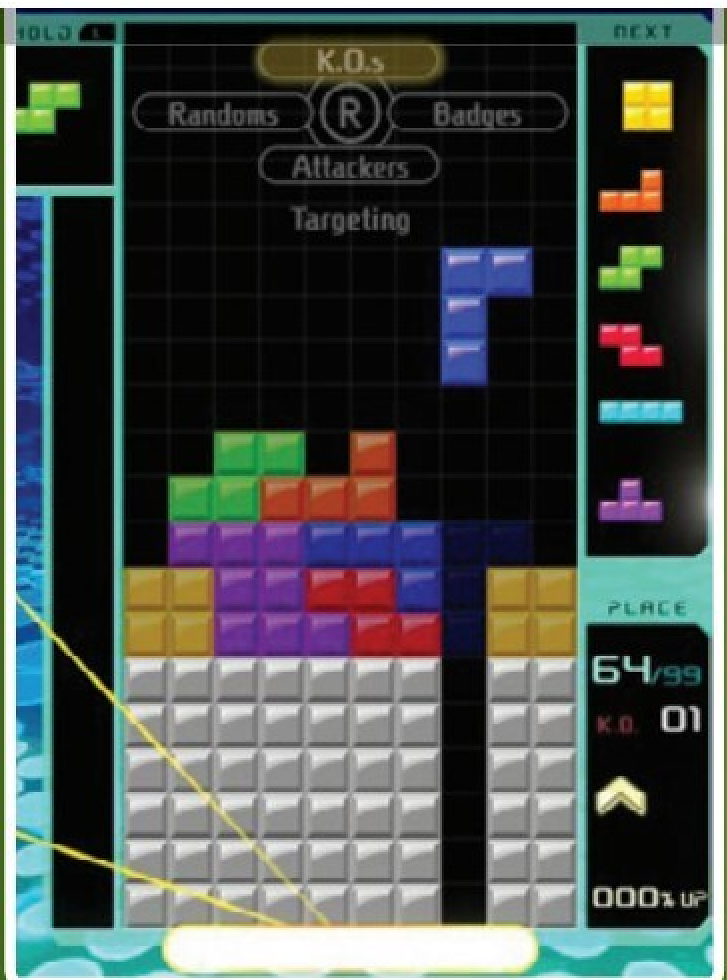
Platform Rift • Vive **Release** February 7 **Rating** N/A

Isle of Pigs does VR well in that it is not a demanding or strenuous experience. Looking at a teetering structure in a 3D space, moving around it to eyeball its weakest point, and then picking up a bird to fling at it is just fun. It sticks to what Angry Birds is good at – satisfying destruction – it just needs more content to become a VR game I would universally recommend. – Kyle Hilliard

8.5 Tetris 99

Platform Switch **Release** February 13 **Rating** E

Tetris 99 is a pleasant surprise, and is my favorite content offered by the Nintendo Switch Online service to date. The idea of playing Tetris against 98 other players at once seems ludicrous but is fun in practice and delivers intense moments just like when you're among the final few in a battle royale game. – Kyle Hilliard



8.75 Civilization VI: Gathering Storm

Platform PC **Release** February 14 **Rating** E10+

Gathering Storm's world congress and natural-disaster system are robust enough to make Civilization feel fresh. The Gathering Storm adds new layers to Civilization VI's incredibly deep strategy system, but taming the planet remains far from simple. – Ben Reeves

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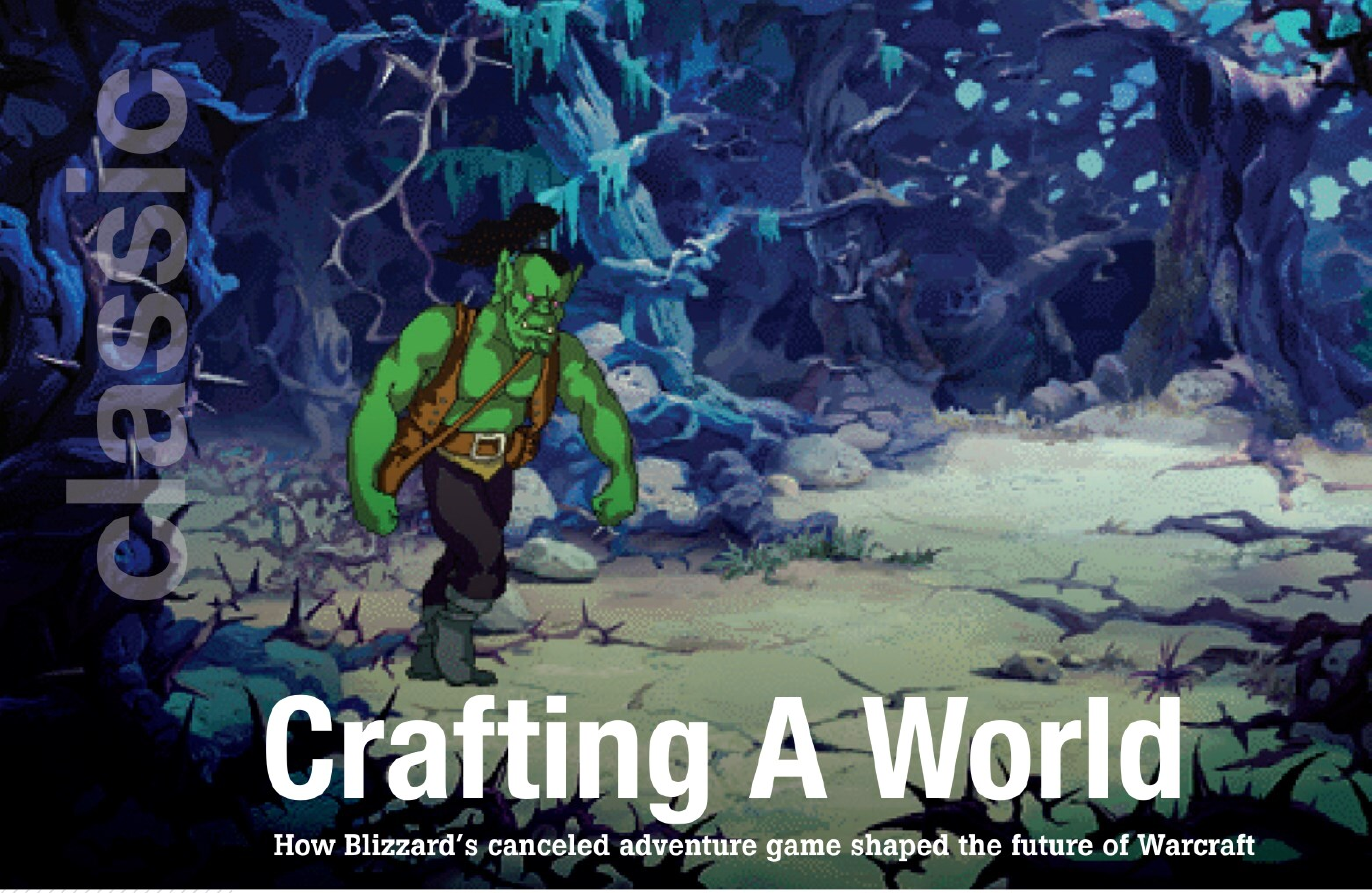


Crafting A World

How Blizzard's canceled adventure game shaped the future of Warcraft

Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness was one of the biggest PC releases of the mid-'90s. Blizzard's second real-time strategy game won several awards and elevated Blizzard as a developer that cared about polish and game mechanics. However, even though fans had enthusiastically warred their way across the land of Azeroth, Blizzard's fantasy world felt largely devoid of personality. Players loved Warcraft's action-packed skirmishes, but its world was irrelevant.

by Ben Reeves

Then, in late 1996, Blizzard's sister company, Capitol Multimedia, suggested Blizzard adapt the Warcraft franchise into another genre. In the early '90s, adventure games like Day of the Tentacle, The Secret of Monkey Island, and Myst ate up a significant portion of the PC market, and Blizzard felt developing an adventure game set within the world of Warcraft was a smart move. Blizzard prototyped what would become Warcraft Adventures: Lord of The Clans.

"One of the things we worked with was establishing what the environments look like," says Blizzard senior art director Samwise Didier. "In the RTS world, it's all top-down and the environments have to be flat and simplistic, because gameplay comes first. You don't want to step on the gameplay with the environment. But with Lord of the Clans we were able to take a third-person view for the first time. You could actually have a horizon, so you could create things that were super tall in the background and that wouldn't mess with the characters or gameplay."

For Lord of the Clan's animated sequences, Blizzard partnered with a subdivision of Capitol Multimedia called Animation Magic. Unfortunately, Animation Magic's track record was very hit-or-miss. In addition to its work on the well-received educational game I.M. Meen, Animation Magic developed the much-maligned Link: The Faces of Evil and Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon games for Phillips' failed CD-i interactive media player.

As Animation Magic oversaw the production of what would eventually amount to more than 20 minutes of classic 2D-animation, Blizzard dreamed about what it would be like to live in Azeroth. The team eventually cooked up a new character named Thrall, a young orc who had been captured at birth and raised as a slave inside a human settlement. A corrupt human lord named Aedelas Blackmoore had educated Thrall, hoping to mold the orcling into a perfect warrior. Over the course of the game, players would follow Thrall as he escaped Blackmoore's secret fortress, learned about the oppression of his people, and ultimately spearheaded a revolt.

Blizzard was heavily inspired by LucasArts' adventure games, and Lord of the Clan's interface was even modeled after the visual interface in Full Throttle. Instead of using pre-written verbs, players could click on objects within the environment, which would bring up a graphical interface full of available actions. For example, if a player wanted to look at something, they would pull up the interface and click on an animated eyeball; if they wanted to pick up and object, they could click on Thrall's hand.

The animated scenes were outsourced to Animation Magic, the same studio that developed the infamous Zelda games for the Phillips CD-i

The Adventure Continued

In 2016, an unfinished build of Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans leaked online and gave fans a look at what they had missed 18 years earlier. Animation Magic outsourced Lord of the Clans' cutscenes to an animation studio in South Korea, but the work was clearly subpar even by 1998 standards. Many also felt that Blizzard's adventure game puzzles were fairly generic and uninspired. Turns out, fans who had petitioned for Lord of the Clans' release hadn't missed much.

Like most adventure games of the day, Lord of the Clans asked players to collect items and combine their tools with objects in the world. Early on, Thrall had to stuff a rock into a sock, which created a makeshift club that could then be used to smash a lock. Later, Thrall would use a mirror to redirect electric beams, jump on a shield to snowboard down a mountain, and unlock a Goblin zeppelin that could be used to travel to new areas.

A press release from the era boasted the game would feature 60 different settings, more than 40,000 feature-film-quality animations, and a "compelling plot guaranteed to enthral [sic] fantasy fans." Blizzard's marketing also referred to Lord of the Clans as a dark comedy, but some of its jokes were a far cry from mature. For example, at one point, Thrall finds himself in a gnome workshop where an annoying chicken flaps around in front of him. At this, Thrall says, "It's taking all my willpower not to choke the chicken."

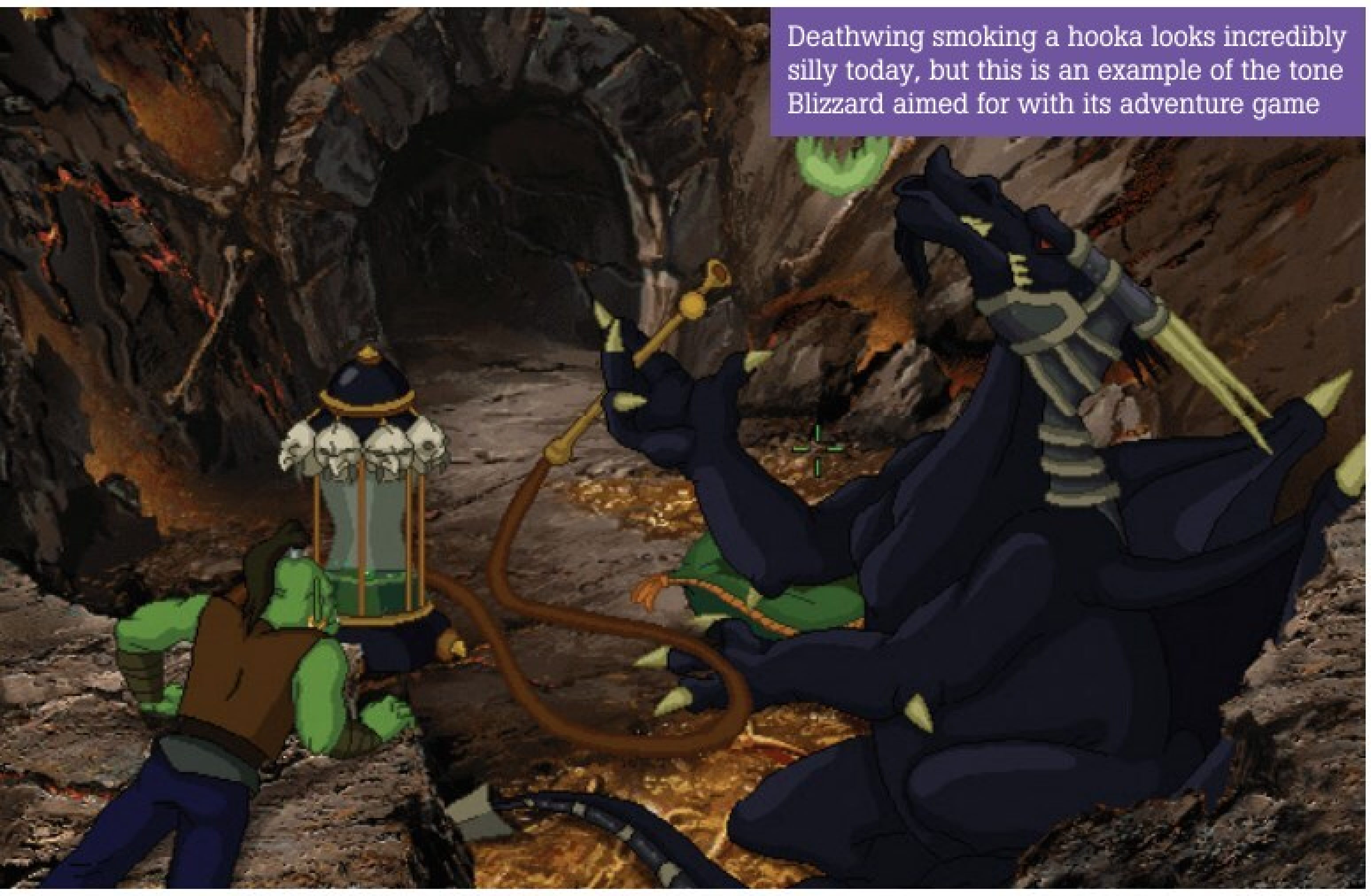
Blizzard worked on Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans for over a year. The studio even recorded several hours of in-game dialogue, using high-level vocal talent such as Peter Cullen (Optimus Prime from *Transformers*), Clancy Brown (*Highlander, Shawshank Redemption, Carnivale*), and Tony Jay (Shere Khan from *TaleSpin*). However, by early 1998, it was clear the project wasn't coming together. Days before the industry hoped to get a better look at Blizzard's project during the 1998 E3 Expo in Atlanta, Blizzard canceled the project. Fans petitioned the company to release the game, but Blizzard had made its decision.

"One of the reasons we pulled back on doing it was because I don't think we really found the fun," Didier says. "At that time, other games were coming out that were already doing what we were doing, and then some. By then, some of those high-end adventure games were coming out. By the time we would be set to come out, [Lord of the Clans] would have seemed dated. It would not have been the coolest one out there."

In fact, the same year that Blizzard canceled Lord of the Clans, LucasArts launched Grim Fandango, a big-budget 3D adventure game from legendary creator Tim Schafer. Grim Fandango was a critical darling but failed to sell, which only punctuated how far the adventure-game industry had fallen since its heyday less than a decade before. If a state-of-the-art adventure game from an experienced creator had failed to tap the market, then Blizzard's experiment likely wouldn't have fared much better.

"It wasn't a waste," Didier says. "Much like with StarCraft: Ghost, we got something out of Lord of the Clan, because that's where Thrall came from. We loved the character, so we said, 'Okay, he's going to be in Warcraft III, and we'll just have to tell people what his story is."

Thrall wasn't the only gift Lord of the Clans gave Blizzard. Characters like Grom Hellscream, Alexstrasza the Dragon Queen, and Deathwing were all concepted for the game, as were fictional locations like Dalaran and Alterac. Writer Chris Metzen passed his development notes over to Star Trek novelist Christie Golden, who wrote the *Warcraft: Lord of the Clans* novel, a reimagining of the adventure game that functioned as a prequel to Warcraft III. Finally, Blizzard's exploration with adventure games gave the studio an opportunity to walk around the world of Azeroth — something the team would do in greater detail with World of Warcraft a few years later. Fans might not have received the adventure game they wanted, but, in the end, Lord of the Clans gave Warcraft fans a world. ◆


Deathwing smoking a hooka looks incredibly silly today, but this is an example of the tone Blizzard aimed for with its adventure game

Pokémon Or Prescription Medication?

There's been an accident, and we're hoping you can help: A truck carrying Pokémon has collided with a delivery van on its way to the pharmacy. Everyone is okay, but the cargo got all mixed up! Which of the following belong in a Pokéball, and which are at home inside a pill bottle? ***by Jeff Cork***

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2. Benicar
3. Celebi
4. Celebrex
5. Crestor
6. Domperidone
7. Illumise
8. Incivek
9. Januvia
10. Lapras
11. Leavanny
12. Ledian
13. Nidorina
14. Novolog
15. Quilava
16. Spiriva
17. Staravia
18. Tranquill
19. Tricor
20. Vinblastine

Answers: Pokémon: 1,3,7,10,11,12,13,15,17,18 Prescription Medication: 2,4,5,6,8,9,14,16,19,20

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